ソードアート・オンライン
オルタナティブ

ガンゲイル・オンライン I

―スクワッド・ジャム―

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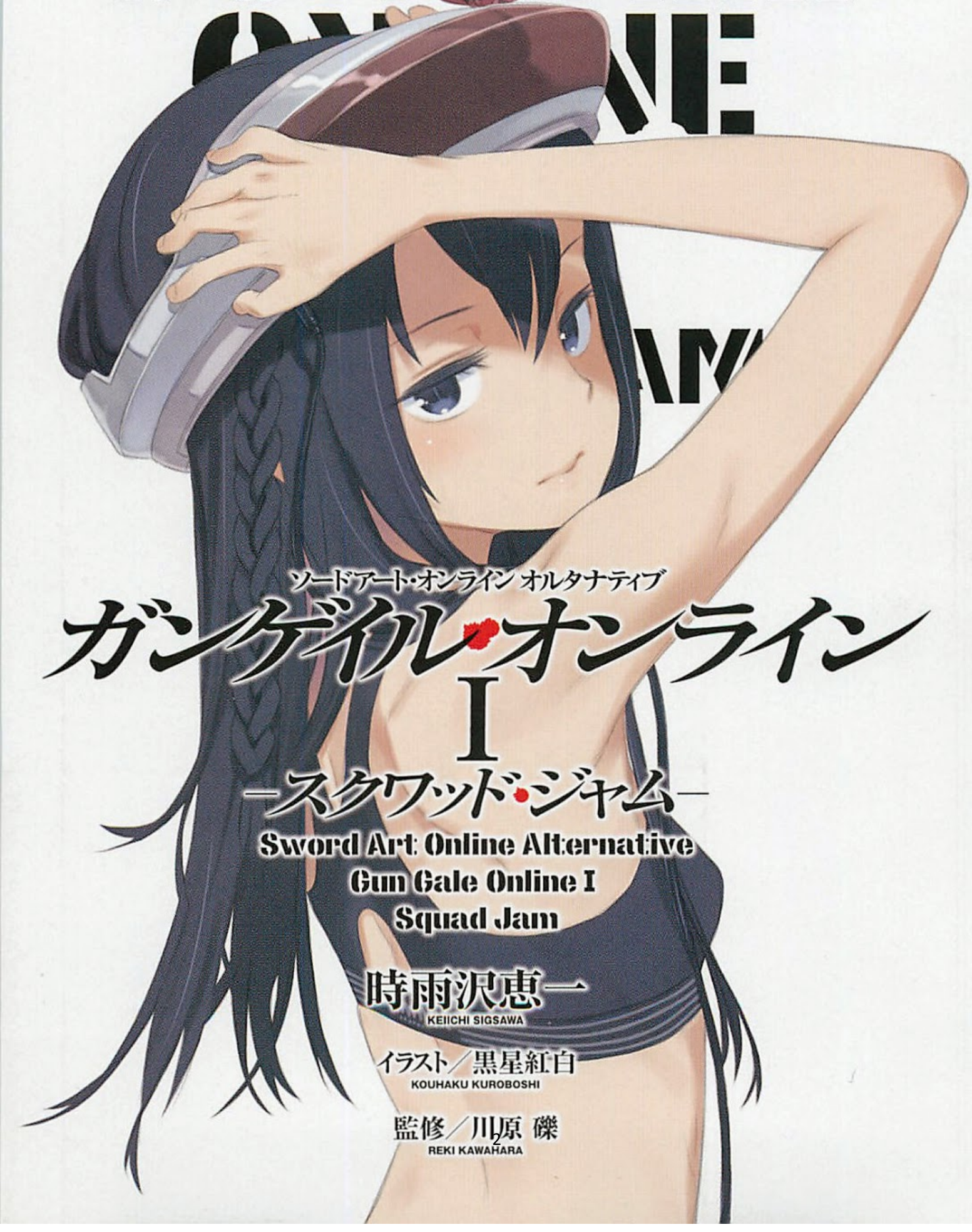
Sword Art Online Alternative
Gun Gale Online I
Squad Jam

電撃文庫

Sword Art Online Alternative

GUN GALE ONLINE



ソードアート・オンライン オルタナティブ

ガンゲイル・オンライン I

―スクワッド・ジャム―

Sword Art Online Alternative
Gun Gale Online I
Squad Jam

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「そうだ。
連中は、スキャンを見てまだ距離があると思って油断したか、
それとも、近すぎるレンに驚いて、そもそもまったく見逃したか。
どちらにせよ、うかつだったな」
「じゃ、じゃあ！
エムさんは、それを分かっていて、
わたしを囮に使ったってこと？」

SAO Alternative – Gun Gale Online Volume 01 - Squad Jam

Prologue

"Oh right, LLENN-chan."

"What iis it? Pito-san?"

"Have you read the newsletter about the opening of a tournament called ≪*Squad Jam*≫? It came this morning."

"……Squid……, *jam*?"

"Uwa! Don't imagine weird stuff!"

"But, it's like ika no shiokara[1], so to speak…… isn't it?"

"Well……, yeah. Maybe."

"I really like it! So, let's go eat a steamy hot meal together!"

"I'll have some snacks that go with sake. If I had to pick, I'd prefer shuto[2]."

"Shuto is good! Now I want to steal it from you!"

"Hey you……, if memory serves me right, you're a minor in the *real world*, right?"

"Of course I don't drink sake. But, I do like the snacks. Whenever my

[1] Ika is Japanese for "squid" while "shiokara" is a food in Japanese cuisine made from various marine animals that consists of small pieces of meat in a brown viscous paste of the animal's heavily salted, fermented viscera (internal organs).

[2] Another Japanese seafood dish. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shuto

dad and big brothers drink sake, I always turn up."

"I see…… You have several big brothers, huh. You're exposing your *RL* details again, LLENN-chan."

"Ah……"

"Well, you don't have to worry about me, but you have to be careful with what you say. Especially when you're a girl like us. There are plenty of guys who collect small tidbits for the sake of collecting, sometimes tricking someone into giving away personal information, then deducing one's *RL* identity by making use of a *net* search engine."

"I'll be careful…… Thank you."

"And here you go with keigo again[3]! You don't need them! In this world, everyone is the same! Stop it! Time to stop! Stop!

"Roger! Pito-san!"

"Good. — Hey, we were supposed to be talking about a *game* tournament! What's worse, did we, two girls, really need to talk about ika no shiokara? And what's even worse, in a *virtual online game*!"

"Yeah, indeed."

"And what's even more worse, in a desert while carrying guns."

"That really is strange, huh."

[3] Keigo (敬語) is Japanese for "honorific speech". This can mean anything from turning all verbs to the polite (masu) form or using the copula です (desu) to special words etc. In this case, LLENN added "gozaimasu" to her thanks. In most other cases, she uses the masu form of the verbs instead of the plain form and this irritated Pitohui.

There were two girls in a desert of rocks and sand.

It was a world where the sky was covered by yellow, heavy clouds to such an extent that the sun could not be seen. There was no wind, so there was no movement, but a dully shining, distant thunder made an ominous roar.

The ground consisted of light brown sand, stones of various sizes that were becoming sand and rocks that continued to make those stones. Whichever way one looked, groups of skyscrapers turned to ruins and diagonally inclined could be seen standing in a line.

The two were sitting in a horizontal line with their legs stretched out in the shade of rocks that were the size of automobiles, in a place where no other word was more appropriate to describe it than the word "savage".

"So……, what is that "*Sq*——something"?"

"That's a good question!"

"No no, that's what you were telling me about earlier."

"Oh did I? I don't remember."

"Yare yare[4], are you an obaa-san *IRL*, Pito-san?"

"Oh! Crap!"

As if they were in a weekend family restaurant, they continued their noisy, friendly chat. But at that place, there was no one to complain no matter how loud their conversation got.

[4] Yare yare is a Japanese exclamation of relief or disappointment.

One of the two among them,

"No, it's not like I'm hiding anything, well ——, I am hiding my *RL* age, but I'm not that old, okay? Of course, I'm not a minor nor pichipichi[5] like you, LLENN-chan."

"Pito-san…… "Pichipichi" is already an obsolete word, isn't it? At least, there's no one who would use it in university."

"Aha, LLENN-chan, you are currently a student! I thought so before, but now I'm sure of it! Another thing confirmed!"

"Craaaaaap!"

Rather than being a woman, the person called “LLENN-chan” a while ago was a young gir… a child older than a young girl.

A child entirely in *pink*.

Although it was *pink*, it wasn’t the lovely “peach-pink”, but rather a dusky-*pink*, mixed with light brown to tone down the brightness.

She had a slender, much less than 150 *cm* tall body. The slightly rounded face had big pupils lined up and reduced the age of her appearance even more.

Her hair was a somewhat dark-tawny, *boyish short cut*. On top, she wore a *knit cap*.

Pink was the colour of her garments. From top to bottom, she was dressed in a common combat uniform. Namely, trousers that resembled *cargo pants* and a long-sleeved *combat shirt*. Long and narrow *pouches*

[5] A word that means “youthful, energetic” etc. and I didn’t know of a word in English that would mean the same and would feel out-dated.

were equipped on both sides of her thighs. As for her feet, she wore high laced *short boots*.

"Really, you have to be careful. Don't you get it?"

"Pito-san, you're just too good of a smooth talker! You, swindler!"

"Hmm, true."

"Wha? I'm not praising you, y'know?"

"I see. Maybe, start doing it?"

"Yeah. I don't plan to do that either, y'know?"

"Huh, I'm the "*type* that improves upon praise" though."

"Pito-saan, that's not a line that you should say yourself, is it?"

The other person, the one called "Pito-san" a while back, was a tough woman clad in black.

She was much older, and she looked like she was in her late twenties.

She had brown skin and a slender face with *sharp* features. Although she was a beautiful woman, the brick-coloured, geometric-figured *tattoo* turning and extending from her cheeks to the nape of her neck created a 'hard to approach' atmosphere.

She was tall, her height easily exceeding 175 *cm*. Her black hair was casually tied into *ponytails* at a high position.

Her garments appeared to be mostly black with dark blue patches.

Although the sharp *lines* of her body were clear, her figure entirely disregarded feminine charm. Thanks to her brawn, anyone seeing her *sharp silhouette* would agree that she was more like an *android* than human.

She wore black *boots*. A military equipment belt, with a long *magazine pouch* attached from her sides to her back, was wrapped around her waist

And so, there was "a thing" that they had in common.

A gun.

The gun that the *pink* girl held was a ≪P90≫, produced by a *Belgian* company named FN *Herstal* (FN). It was around 50 *cm* long. It was an atypical weapon that had a hard-to-distinguish *grip*, looking like it was a rectangular box, which had a part of it carved out to form a hole.

The *magazine* was made out of *clear plastic* and had visible bullets attached atop the centre of the gun. It contained 50 bullets each. Excluding *machine guns*, it was a *magazine* with the largest *capacity*.

The P90, just like her clothes, was painted in darkened *pink*. Coupled with its atypical appearance, at a glance the gun looked as if it was a toy. Holding it with her small body, she even looked like a child who received a *Christmas present* with flashy wrapping paper.

As for the other one, an *assault rifle*——in other words, a military-use automatic rifle, leaning on a rock, was placed next to the black beauty.

It was one of the most famous guns in the world, the Russian-made ≪AK-47≫. The gun was equipped with a curved *magazine* that could fire 30 7.62x39 *mm* bullets.

“At any rate, praising others is the basis of popularity *techniques*, LLENN-chan.”

“I-it’s not like I want to be popular!”

“Eh, you don’t want a girlfriend?”

“No I don’t. Since I am a girl.”

"You shouldn’t worry about minor details like whether your partner is a man or a woman."

“That’s the most important thing in my opinion.”

Just as it seemed that the noisy chatter between the black beauty and the *pink* girl would continue ad infinitum—— a muffled sound of an explosion erupted in this world.

As soon as they felt the vibrations of the ground, the two stopped their idle talk, shouting:

“The trap sprung” “The trap sprung”

They then quickly stood up. The black beauty seized her AK-47 and the *pink* girl released the P90 that she held.

“Let’s get him!” “Let’s get him!”

Once again, the two cheerfully sputtered such boisterous remarks in unison, then split left and right and jumped out of the shade of the rock that they were hiding behind.

At the sand plains about 50 *metres* away, the cloud of sand that soared up due to the explosion of a bomb, which was set up underground, was

settling down. As there was no wind, it was clearing up slowly.

Inside the cloud, their opponent that got caught in the trap——a monster, which was a giant earthworm that was 40 cm wide with an overall length of around 5 *metres*, was raging and writhing by striking the ground as a red light gleamed from various parts of its body.

"I'll *support* you! Unleash all of your bullets at it!

The black beauty who ran 10 *metres* stopped as she gave her instructions, then pressed her AK-47 to her right shoulder and set up to fire.

"Roger!"

The *pink* girl at once hastened the *speed* of her run.

The AK-47 roared. The gunshots made the air vibrate.

The 7.62x39 mm bullets unleashed in *rhythmical semi-auto* were absorbed by the giant raging earthworm.

Empty, dull green shells that were forced out of the gun's right side fell onto the sand and bounced back slightly——and then the shells became small grains of light and dispersed, disappearing from this world.

At a speed that matched that of the bullets soaring right next to her,

"Yaa!"

With her P90 set to her right shoulder and her body inclined forward, the girl rushed forward with her small body. And then discharged in *full auto*.

The consecutive, *drum roll*-like gunshots joined the *rhythmic* beats of the

AK-47.

5.7x28 *mm* bullets were launched out of the P90's muzzle and they made successive holes in the giant earthworm's body.

With its body riddled with bullets, the giant earthworm opened its mouth in a such a way that it looked like its head had split in two. And then, it gave an ominous roar.

"Tail attack incoming!", the black beauty stopped discharging her AK-47 and shouted.

"Roger!", the *pink* girl shouted in return, but even so, she continued charging. Her left hand released the P90, extended to the *pouch* on her left thigh, went inside it and grabbed a new *magazine*.

The giant earthworm made a grand undulating motion, faced the *pink* girl who was closing in and waved its tail like a whip.

"Ho!"

The *pink* girl *jumped*, kicking up sand with her feet. She flew until she reached a sufficient height of 2 *metres*.

Above the space that the giant earthworm's tail had cut through, the *pink* girl exchanged her *magazines*. She bravely threw away the *magazine* with 8 bullets remaining and, with a machine-like speed, loaded in a new one.

"Ya!"

And so, just as she easily landed on the sandy soil, she faced the giant earthworm at her feet, and while turning the muzzle of her P90 left and right, as if she was sweeping with a broom, she unleashed the rapid fire

of her *full auto* on the worm without mercy.

3 seconds later, more holes were opened throughout the monster earthworm's body, with red light gushing out of them, and——

It turned in small fragments of light and was eliminated without a trace.

"Hmm, when we were in the middle of setting up for an ambush…… what were we talking about?"

The black beauty asked. The *pink* girl answered with an amazed expression.

"Something about squids and tournaments, right? Pito-san, you start saying something and then forget what you were saying shortly after."

Under the muddled and ominously wriggling sky, the two used their *slings* to put their respective weapons onto their shoulders, and leisurely walked through the desert. If the danger of the savage environment was overlooked, the scene would look just like a casual stroll of a parent and child.

"Oh right right. But should I remember that you, LLENN-chan, have elder brothers and are a female college student?"

"Yeah, forget that. ——So, what about squids (i k a)?", asked the *pink* girl as they continued their stroll through the desert.

"Ika is *squid*. While I used—— *squad*. Understand? LLENN-chan, are

you a rikei[6]? Which course?"

"Huh? Mine is……, well, it's fine."

"Oh, you didn't fall for it. You've learnt well, huh. Onee-san is glad."

"Returning to the topic, what's a *squad*?"

"In English, it means "a group" or "a team". Speaking about the army, there are subdivisions like companies or platoons, right? A squad is the smallest unit. It seems to be formed from around ten people."

"Hmmm…… And what about *jam*?"

"It's spelled as J, A, M, and although it may mean the thing that you use on pastries, it originally meant "tightly crowded". If I said that '*traffic jam*' means 'traffic congestion', you should understand it."

"Yeah, I understand. A *jam* is also when poor operation of a gun causes empty shells and bullets to block it, right?"

"Yep. Maybe I should have said that first."

"And so……, "squads jumbled together"?"

"That's right. In other words――"

"In other words?"

[6] In Japanese high schools, the students must choose one of the two courses: bunkei (文系, humanities, social sciences and fine arts) or rikei (理系, science, maths). The chosen course determines the number of lessons the student will have on a given subject. A student who chose the rikei course would have fewer English lessons.

"A *Squad Jam* is a *battle royale* kind of tournament in ≪Gun Gale Online≫ that pits small *teams* against each other

Chapter 1 – Karen's Gloom

When Kohiruimaki Karen returned to the real world——

The thin *digital* radio clock hanging on the wall displayed 18th January 2026; 17:49.

It was a room of an apartment house[7] with no one else in it. The six jou[8] bedroom, which had a *sliding door* connecting it to the ten jou *living room*, was a spacious room. The sun had set on the other side of the window, so it was dark, and an LED light was used as a pale night light.

The wallpapers were all of a composed white colour. There was a shaggy, *cream*-coloured carpet laid on the *living* room floor, and there was a largish *table* with very short legs, and some *cushions* at the centre of the carpet. A large mirror was placed in a corner of the room.

Textbooks and reference books were neatly lined up by subject on the bookshelves along the walls. It was an orderly, tidy room that gave the impression that she was the lord of the house.

With the *sliding door* currently open, the *living room* and bedroom were integrated, and a wooden *low bed* was placed in this integrated room. A wide wardrobe was placed along the wall, opposite the window.

Karen raised the upper half of her body from the *bed*. She then took off the machine that carried the five senses into a *game* world——the ≪*AmuSphere*≫, and then carefully placed it on the right side of her

[7] The English word "mansion" was used in this case; however, the word is usually used in the sense of "large apartment" or "apartment house" in Japanese.

[8] A jou (畳) is a traditional Japanese unit used for measuring the size of a room. It is equal to 1.653 square metres (the size of a Nagoya tatami mat).

pillow.

Dressed in *pale yellow pyjamas*, Karen lowered her feet toward the left side of the bed, and extended her left hand to the edge of the wall. The sensors installed there detected her hand, and caused the room's lights to come on bit by bit.

After waiting for 5 seconds so that her eyes got used to the brightness, Karen slowly stood up. Walking two steps with her bare feet, she moved from the bedroom to the *living room*. There was a clothes hanger to the side of the mirror. There, a „thing that wasn't clothes" hung from the hanger.

Karen took that thing into her hands and faced the mirror.

"……"

There, she saw herself, displeased.

A tall, 183 *cm* in height, woman with black, long hair.

Herself, holding a black *plastic air gun* in her hands—— the P90 that was held in place with the support of her chest that now looked awfully small.

Karen's mouth slowly moved.

"*Squad Jam* …… What should I do. A personal battle in teams, huh…… I'm kinda reluctant……"

*　*　*

Kohiruimaki Karen was brought up without a care in the world.

Her parents, who hailed from the Aomori prefecture, moved to Hokkaido and opened a business which achieved success within the same generation. They were also blessed with children: two boys, two girls and then, several years later, on 20 April 2006, the youngest child, Karen, was born.

Brought up in a loving environment, like a princess, by her parents and her four elder siblings in their affluent home in the northern region, the growing Karen—— grew too much. In height.

Her height, which started continuously growing since her third year in primary school, exceeded 170 *cm* when she graduated. It was as if Karen's wish not to grow any more was not heard by God.

In the end, the currently nineteen year-old Karen, who continued growing even through middle school, was 183 *cm* tall. If this was a foreign country, there would probably be plenty of females like that.

However, this was Japan.

Karen's parents, siblings and close friends understood Karen's feelings, so they never spoke about her height, but the people in their society were not so kind.

In both her middle school and high school, Karen received useless invitations from sports clubs that she had no interest in. Karen only had an ordinary aptitude, so she was fed up with the invitations that did not respect her wishes.

If she walked around town, there were truly many people who cruelly teased her as „giant girl", and insulted her out loud on purpose.

And so, despite how much she grieved and moaned over this, she could no longer do anything about it.

The tall figure *complex* since puberty changed her feminine nature. Karen, the girl who was the very image of childish innocence and cheerfulness, and was sometimes mistaken for a boy, no longer spoke with anyone aside from those close to her, secluding herself to reading and music, and becoming a completely introverted person.

Although she started growing out her black hair to look at least slightly more girlish, it didn't change anything, in fact, if she missed the *timing* to cut her hair, it would become troublesome putting it in order every morning.

Her large height also affected her choice of clothes.

Karen gave up entirely on feminine *fashion*, and chose only to wear *rough* and simple garments.

One year ago, Karen graduated from high school and came to Tokyo. She was expected to go to a local university from her parent's home, but, as she had nothing to lose, she tried her luck at the leading ojou-sama

school in Japan, and ended up passing the examination. Her parents were extremely happy, and Karen borrowed a room in a high-class apartment house in the metropolitan area where her eldest sister lived.

Hoping that something might change even if a little, from April, 2025, Karen began her solitary life in Tokyo.

What awaited Karen, who began going to a notable women's university, was obviously an unpleasant reality.

As expected, age did its thing, so Karen wasn't openly teased about her height, but—— Karen wasn't suited for the „normal female university student *life*" that glorified youth activities, like *fashion*, *circles*, and *dates*.

Moreover, in this *escalator* university, the majority of students were those who came from kindergarten and elementary sections of the school. As expected, in the end, Karen didn't find any friends, around whom she could relax her guard. Of course, Karen's introverted personality, and the resulting lack of actively talking to people, were also at fault.

Karen spent each day attending lectures, eating lunch alone, not taking off her *headphones* in her free time, returning to her apartment house and then spending her time alone in her room.

Her interaction with other people was limited to her family and friends in her home town. The only people that she was able to have a friendly chat with consisted of only her elder sister, her sister's spouse, and her niece. She was forbidden to find a part-time job by her parents. However, because of that, she did receive an inexhaustible allowance.

If she had went on just a little longer without a social life, she might even forget how to socialise with people——, harbouring such a fear, Karen was absent-mindedly viewing the *news* on the *Internet* while visiting her parents during her summer holiday when one article caught her eye.

The heading was—— 『*Virtual Reality* (VR) *Online Games*, from Revival to Prosperity. People's Desire to Enjoy Another Life Is Unending』

After a special device is mounted on one's head, the device exchanges information about the senses with the brain via electrical signals, thus one can experience all the five senses as if actually being in that world——, that was VR technology.

A *game* using this *FullDive* technology to allow a large number of people to participate in it simultaneously via the *Internet* is a VR *game*.

Even Karen knew about the existence of such a thing.

There probably weren't any people who didn't know about it. After all, 3 years ago in November 2022, when Karen was in the first year of high school, a major incident that not only shook Japan, but the whole world as well.

≪Sword Art Online≫——abbreviated as SAO.

The name of the world's first VR・MMORPG (Massively Multiplayer Online *Role Playing Game*).

Due to the ill will of a single genius developer, it became a dreadful prison.

The ten thousand players who logged in on the very day the official *service* of the game began were imprisoned in that VR world.

They became unable to voluntarily leave the game.

And that wasn't the end. If a *character* inside the *game* died, or if someone in the real world tried to forcibly take off the device mounted on the *player*'s head, the player's brain would be fried and the player would really die, that was the literal „*death game*" that was enforced.

Right after the incident, it made the *news* every day, but as the means for rescue weren't achieved, at times it became excessive. Every time a new casualty appeared, the *news* would only cover the respective death.

Before long, aside from those who had someone precious trapped inside, people gradually forgot about the incident.

2 years later, in November, 2024, when Karen was studying extra hard for her university examinations, SAO again made the *news*. The cheerful news that the people trapped in the *death game* were released.

However, as a result, four thousand people had lost their lives, and thus SAO ended up shining radiantly as „the *game* which killed the most people in the world".

'Now such dangerous *game* will finally disappear', the only ones who thought like that were people who didn't like VR *games*. While the players were still trapped in the game, a „this time, safe" new-model device was offered for sale and a new *game* was announced.

The news article reported:

『Now, in the summer of 2025, the number of VR *games* continues to increase. Naturally, the *player* population has also surged, and this prosperity seems to imply that everyone has ended up forgetting about that repulsive incident in the not-so-distant past.

Games that can be enjoyed with the five senses have brought about more virtual realities than ever before; can the ability to simply enjoy „another self" truly bring such people human growth and genuine happiness? If one wants to feel something with one's five senses, shouldn't they just cast aside their *personal computers* and go outside with their flesh and blood? Like children once healthily did in the countryside?

Isn't there a chance that, before long, the youths growing accustomed to fictional worlds, where they do not even feel real pain, will commit a

crime beyond the imagination of adults? I await calm discussions.』

That was an article, full of the reporter's prejudice and unpleasant feelings, that downright criticised VR *games*, but…

"„Another self"……"

To Karen, the resulting *impact* was the exact opposite.

Karen thought.

That if she became a different self inside a *game*, then she could probably *communicate* with other people a bit. And that this would probably have the effect like that of *rehabilitation* in the real world.

Karen, who up till now had no interest in VR *games* whatsoever, looked it up from scratch. Knowing that one of her few friends in her hometown was currently playing one, she met up with her and asked her.

The friend, named Miyu, said:

"What's that you say! I'm so glad that I'm getting more *game* partners!"

Pleasantly surprised, she taught Karen a lot of things.

Karen understood that, at the very least, the current VR *games* were definitely not as dangerous as SAO. So, she decided to *play* one.

Although she decided to do it and figured that she should „strike the iron while it's hot", it didn't seem like her elderly parents would allow it in their home, so Karen concluded her visit ahead of time and returned to Tokyo.

She went to a consumer electronics emporium straight from the Haneda Airport and got her hands on the necessities.

Firstly, the huge, silver-coloured *goggle*-like *AmuSphere*.

This machine would intercept all senses that it received, and would send fictional senses to the brain.

In other words, the operation of the device would be something like a trance, but there were numerous safety devices in the *AmuSphere*.

Although the device intercepts real senses, it does have *monitors*. If they sensed that the user's pulse rate has drastically increased, or that the user's breathing has stopped for a long period, or bodily disorders like headaches and stomach aches, the machine was set to activate the automatic *shut-down* feature; this feature could not be disabled.

Additionally, it also had the function of allowing *home security* systems like burglar alarms and fire alarms, as well as disaster prevention news, like emergency earthquake reports and tsunami warnings to be linked to the device to have it return the user to the real world in case of emergency.

Karen also purchased a game.

What she picked from among the many VR *games* in existence was a game that Miyu played as well, ≪*ALfheim Online*≫——abbreviated as ALO

It was a game where one would become a fairy with wings in a *fantasy* world and have adventures.

"Kohi, I'm sure you're going to be pleased too! It's quite common to fight with other races, but that doesn't mean that you absolutely must fight. Just flying around the beautiful world and talking with people is awfully fun too!"

Just as Miyu had said, the beautiful world depicted in *sample* photos with its dazzling green forests , and brilliantly blue sky and water increased Karen's expectations.

If the world was so beautiful in pictures alone, then just how great could it be „inside" the game? Flying with one's body alone would have her heart pounding.

While listening to Miyu's *lecture* over the phone, Karen finished the setup of the *personal computer* and *AmuSphere*, and finally attempted the first *FullDive* in her life.

As the environment was pleasant, Karen purposefully changed into her *pyjamas*, closed the *curtains* and *switched* on the *air conditioner*.

And then she mounted the *AmuSphere*, which was connected to her *personal computer*, on her head, lied down in the centre of her *bed*, and closed her eyes.

"*Link, start!*"

Finally, immediately after she commanded the device with her voice——

Karen's entire consciousness was brought to another world.

She felt as if her senses had left her body, like she had fallen asleep, and before she knew it, she was standing in a dark room, listening to a voiced guide.

She understood that this wasn't reality, and yet her consciousness was very clear. It seemed as if this was a lucid dream (a dream where one perceives that „this is a dream") where she could move as she pleased.

Calming down after her expectations were surpassed, Karen followed

the instructions of the voiced guide and entered the necessary details using the *keyboard* floating in the air.

As for her *character* name, she decided to use „Len“ which parodied her real name, but as for the spelling, in order not to overlap with the names of other *characters*, she wrote it entirely in upper-case, and also doubled the consonants, so it was written as „ＬＬＥＮＮ“.

Out of the nine races, she figured that she should choose the same one as Miyu, so she chose the wind fairy race, the ≪*Sylphs*≫. As each player started the *game* from the territory of their chosen race, she should be able to meet up with Miyu instantly.

Having finished inputting all the details, Karen went to the world of ALO as LLENN.

“W-why!”

And then intensely despaired.

『Sorry! Kohi, I completely forgot that you were troubled by your height…...』

On the other side of the phone call, Miyu earnestly apologised, but the fact that her randomly generated ≪*avatar*≫, in other words, her other self in the *game*, was a tall beauty even when compared to other *characters* of the same race was absolutely not something she could be held accountable for.

LLENN, having seen her appearance in a mirror, was so *shocked* that her pulse rose rapidly, and the *AmuSphere*'s safety devices activated, forcibly *linking* her out just 20 seconds after the *game* had started.

『Well……, this is a bit late, but there are races with short

avatars…...Like the cat fairy race, the ≪Cait Sith≫…… Do you want to redo your *character* generation? Additional charges will be incurred though…...』

Despite Miyu's proposal, Karen declined.

It wasn't a problem of money.

Even though the parameters were *random*, she was *shocked* by her tall figure, thus the *game* ALO itself became unpleasant.

Although she wanted to try VR *games*, she had no intention of returning to ALO. Having been told this, Miyu replied with an apology:

『I see…… It's unfortunate, but it can't be helped, huh. Well, I think that your stubbornness is a virtue, Kohi』

After saying that, her long-time friend offered an alternative solution.

『Say, Kohi, do you know about *character* ≪*conversion*≫?』

That was the feature that allowed „moving" the *character* LLENN that she had just created to another VR *game*.

The framework, called ≪*The Seed*≫ was completely the same for a great majority of VR *games*. Hence, it was possible to move *characters* with a single ID.

In such a case, the strengths of a developed character would relatively be passed on into the new game.

For example, if one *converted* a *character* that had physical strength tempered in some *game*, even in the new *game* the person could *start* with a character that had its physical strength tempered.

Though one's original character would be deleted, and the *items* and

money in one's possession would not be carried over—— but, either way, it was not a concern for Karen. The fact that the already-made ID wouldn't go to waste was a *merit*.

In that case, it seemed that she would be able to search for the *avatar* that she wanted.

『It will be a different *game*, but if you don't understand something, be sure to ask! If I get my hands on a *ticket* to Kanzaki Elza's *live* performance, I'll be coming to Tokyo, so I hope you'll give me a place to stay!』

In the end, Miyu shrewdly arranged for compensation before parting with Karen.

And so, Karen used her ID to connect to various VR *games* and recklessly went on a *character conversion* spree.

Nonetheless, she would have to buy the *game software* each time, so she picked *games* that had trial periods, in other words, allowed trying it for free.

She no longer cared about the *game* genre and things like that.

Many VR *games* had blossomed simultaneously like flowers.

Car race games where one can drive automobiles. *Flight simulations* where one can fly planes and participate in air battles. SF[9] adventures about travelling in space. Games about enjoying numerous *sports* in *virtual* reality. Games about making love with beautiful women and girls. Among them, even games where the player would normally „live an everyday life".

Karen, who knocked on the gates of a great number of VR *games*, would be displeased with the created *avatar* at least a bit, and immediately go to

[9] Abbreviation for "science fiction".

create an *account* in another *game*.

Her tenacity was so great that it even amazed Miyu who proposed the idea, but Miyu didn't interfere.

Several days later, LENN,

"I FOUND IIIT!"

Shouted at the *starting* point of a certain VR *game*. It was an exclamation at the top of her voice.

In a bizarre world with a crazed dusk-like, ominous colour sky, and where skyscrapers with *metallic* walls were spread disorderly, LLENN's figure that was reflected in a *mirror* glass…

"Yes…… I found it! I found it!"

Was wearing a green combat uniform and was a probably not even 150 cm tall,

"I found it!"

Chibi girl.

Thus, the name of the *game* that LLENN found herself in——

Was ≪*Gun Gale Online*≫.

Just as the „gun" and „gale" in its name implied, it was a ruined world where *characters* freely fought with one another—— a world of guns.

*　*　*

November, 2025.

More than three months had passed since Karen began playing the *game*. Winter had arrived at Tokyo as well.

After Karen, who did not have any hobbies, did not have friends in Tokyo, did not participate in club activities and was forbidden from having a part-time job, attended her lectures, finished the preparations for her lessons, and her revisions——she still had plenty of time for *playing*.

Weekdays and holidays before her examinations continued to diminish. As she had a methodical personality, Karen precisely decided the time for *diving*, and continued playing *Gun Gale Online*——abbreviated as GGO.

VR *games*, as Miyu said, were „a magnificent and well done virtual space".

Although, in the sense that it used and allowed one to experience the five senses to its *full* potential it was no different from reality, a virtual space was just a virtual space after all. It would definitely not win against reality in the volume of information that can be exchanged; one would quickly comprehend „which world one is in".

In other words, there was no need to worry „which one was reality again?"——

In a sense, this is probably a good thing. That's what Karen thought.

The stage of GGO, ruined after the final war, was an Earth that didn't

even suit the „b“[10] from “beauty”.

No matter if it was sunny or cloudy, and if it was morning or midday, the sky was dyed in the colours of a crazed evening sun, as if it was a brush cleaner with yellow and red colours dissolved in it.

Greenery was extremely scarce in this land, instead, it was overflowing with deserts, wastelands and ruins; a world that was the exact opposite of ALO.

The role the *players* performed was the people who returned to such an Earth on-board a spaceship.

Hunting rampaging *grotesque monsters*, crazed machines that attacked people, and, occasionally, relentlessly fighting against fellow *players* and killing each other. That was GGO.

If she hadn’t got this *avatar*, Karen would most likely never have played GGO.

The weapons used in the *game*, just as its name implied, were guns.

In GGO, guns were divided into two categories.

The first was ≪optical guns≫.

Blasters, ray guns, beam rifles, ray guns（kōsenjū）——there were various ways of calling them, but their structure was identical. With an SF-like fictional appearance and name, they fired energy beams instead of bullets.

[10] The Japanese version is the “u” from “utsukushisa” (美しさ)

Such weapons had the *merit* of being small and lightweight even with *energy packs* included, as well as having long range and high accuracy. At the same time, they had the *demerit* of their rays dealing little *damage*, and, moreover, in battles against people, it was possible to block a considerable amount of the rays by using an *item* called a ≪Anti-light bullet defense *field*≫.

The *design* of the guns was SF-*tic* and it looked like the guns were assembled by combining all the parts in a straight line. Setting-wise, these SF small arms were „what was used inside a spaceship".

The other category was ≪Live-ammunition guns≫.

The setting for these guns was that „they were the actual guns, or blueprints for the guns that remained on the desolated Earth". With permission obtained from the gun *makers*, existing real guns were reproduced in the game.

Alongside noisy gunshots, bullets with mass were released. Although, of course, since this was inside a *game*, it only „seemed that way".

The *merit* of such guns was that each bullet had high power and wouldn't be blocked by defense *fields*. The *demerits* were that the trajectory was easily influenced by external factors like the wind, and their magazines were heavy.

Thus, the *theory* was that optical guns were for battles against *monsters*. While in battles against humans, it was better to use live-ammunition guns.

That said, there were plenty of *gun maniacs* in GGO, so there were also people who used nothing but live-ammunition guns even in battles against *monsters*, as if saying „Screw efficiency!". For example, those like Pitohui.

However, as for LLENN who scored a chibi *avatar*——

Her short character with a frame of less than 150 *cm* was a considerably rare sight.

In this world full of rough and rigid people, both *player characters* and *non-player characters* (NPC) controlled by *computers*, she only attracted attention.

If she walked through a town in a valley of skyscrapers in this SF world, overflowing with gaudy *neon*,

"Uwaa! How tiny!"

"What is that……? A girl? A boy?"

"Have you ever seen anything like this? There's a kid in the game……"

"Cute, huh, oi."

"It's so small. There are even *avatars* like that."

"An NPC?"

Everyone unanimously muttered about LLENN.

Each time this occurred, LLENN could not contain the impulse to slacken her lips; letting anyone see her reaction would be embarrassing, so she covered everything below her nose with a *bandana*.

Just enjoying a *virtual* chibi was considerably fun on its own, but deep

down LLENN was a serious person, and she had begun playing a *game* after going through all that trouble, so she figured that she should try fighting. Isn't someone small and strong cool?

In *games*, there was usually a training course aimed at beginners called a '*tutorial*'.

In GGO's case, an NPC demon instructor would have the player experience every single piece of knowledge he had, starting from how to shoot with a gun, to how to conceal oneself during a battle, the appearance and weaknesses of all sorts of *monsters*, how to find them and so on.

Some time ago, Miyu said:

『You don't need to take a *tutorial*! That is just a big waste of time! If you listen to your comrades, you'll naturally learn what you need! It's a an on-the-spot decision-making kind of thing! An *on-the-job-training*!』

And things like that, but Karen was suited for silently training on her own. In the first place, she did not have any comrades.

Thus, LLENN *mastered* how to use guns, which she had never touched in her whole life, in the *virtual* world.

She even studied matters concerning the GGO-specific *assistance* feature, the ≪*Bullet Circle*≫, in-depth.

Called the ≪trajectory prediction circle≫[11] (d a n d ō y o s o k u m a r u) in Japanese, it was an *assistance system* that told the person on the offense where their bullets would hit.

[11] Sigsawa uses 弾道予測円 as the translation for the Engrish term "bullet circle". However, Kawahara translated the term as 着弾予測円 (impact prediction circle, chakudan yosoku maru)

Touching the gun's trigger with one's finger would *switch* the feature on, and a *light green circle*, in other words, a circle (maru), would appear before one's eyes. A bullet would *randomly* hit somewhere within the circle, fluctuating between being big and small.

The size of the circle would change depending on the distance to the target, the gun's performance, and the *player*'s own abilities. And so, the contraction of the circle was *synchronised* with the user's heartbeat.

In other words, if the user is constantly tense with their heart pounding heavily, the circle will violently contract and one's aim will not be stable. Although it can be disregarded in close-range battles where the target appeared to be large, it truly is important in long-range sniping.

In the *tutorial*, there was a course called 【Learn long-range sniping!】, but the „calm yourself down, then aim" was the least successful session for LLENN. With her considerably poor results, the NPC instructor kept becoming angry.

"Yeah, let's stop using sniper rifles."

Humans were beings that had both their strengths and their weak points. LLENN completely gave up on sniping without any regrets.

On the contrary, as she got an unexpectedly high score at nimbly aiming and shooting at nearby opponents, a technique called ≪*snapshot*≫, the instructor,

『Yep! *Submachine guns* are the most suitable for you!』

Gave her such a recommendation.

Thus, the honest to a fault LLENN who *cleared* the tutorial entirely began farming *monsters* by herself.

As for her first farming session, she attacked *monsters* walking sluggishly, which looked like a crossbreed between a pig and an ostrich, in a hilly area a short distance away from the city.

Although after seeing most of the *monsters*, LLENN considered shooting them to be a pity, she surprisingly pulled the trigger of the optical gun without any resistance.

As the spot that was struck only shined red as a hit effect, and since monsters dispersed into fragments and then disappeared upon dying, the resulting feeling of „hurting and killing“ the creature was rather light.

LLENN earnestly enjoyed the *game*. She practised the things she was taught one by one; even after she was killed by *monsters* that she had no absolutely no chance of winning against, she contemplated on where she went wrong.

Whenever she encountered *monsters* that she could not defeat by any means, she peeked at *Internet* walkthrough *sites* and learned the proper method to defeat them.

Plain effort resulted in her steady progress. LLENN continued killing *monsters* and steadily earning experience points, as well as *credits*, in other words, the money that could be used within the game.

As her experience points increased, she was able to gain attribute points.

These points would then be distributed among the six stats: strength,

agility, vitality (endurance), dexterity, sensibility and luck, to build „oneself to one's tastes".

'Since I obtained a short-build avatar after great pains, by increasing my agility, I would be able to run faster. I want to raise my dexterity as well to be able to produce something. Luck would probably be nice and would be helpful. If I don't have sufficient strength, there will be guns that I won't be able to fire, so the stat sounds reasonable. I'm not planning on getting hit and I don't mind being frail, so I have no need for vitality. Sensibility? No clue.'

As LLENN considered that, she proceeded to raise her agility and dexterity as her *main* stats, as well as strength and luck as her *sub* stats. Her *trauma* of always being the last one in footraces due to the hugeness of her body influenced her decision considerably.

As her on-hand *credits* increased, she was able to purchase an additional weapon and equipment. LLENN bought a *submachine gun-type* firearm with a high rapid-fire ability to replace her optical gun.

And then, deliberating on the use for the remaining *credits*, she decided to spend them for changing her attire. As she got her hands on a cute body after great pains, she desired to wear girlish, cute clothes as well.

In a savage SF world like GGO, this was a wrong decision no matter how one thought about it, but LLENN herself did not mind.

LLENN went to the town's tailor—— or more like a combat uniform shop, and excitedly searched for cute clothes.

Since this was GGO, there naturally weren't any clothes with *frills*. Unfortunately, she couldn't find the *lolita* clothes that she had been yearning for ever since she was a junior high school student and had seen them in a magazine but had to give up on them as they had no

chance of suiting her *eucalyptus* tree-like self.

What she discovered instead was a *system* that allowed the colour of the initial equipment that she was wearing to be changed to one's favourite colour. As expected from a *game* world.

In that case, LLENN desired *pink*.

No matter how much she yearned for cute and lovely *pink* clothes, she was unable to wear them in the real world. Although they would absolutely not suit Karen, she was sure that they would suit LLENN.

The sole shade of *pink* available in the colour sample, unfortunately, wasn't the highly bright and vivid one that she had once yearned for. It was a dusky *pink* that she hadn't really seen much in reality.

Well, even so, *pink* was *pink*. LLENN changed her combat uniform to that colour from top to bottom: her *short boots, bandana*, gloves, equipment *belt* and even the knit cap that was meant for holding down her hair in battle, all of them were changed to the same pink.

Having been reborn by changing the colour of her entire body to pink and with her heart pounding as she left the shop, LLENN looked at the self that was reflected in the *display window*[12], and…

"……"

Looking at it, she frowned in silence. That's right. There was still a part that wasn't in *pink*. LLENN rushed to a weapon *custom shop* and requested a *paint* job.

She had both the optical gun, which she carried on her shoulder, and the

[12] Literally, it's "show window" in Engrish.

deep gray gun painted in the same *pink* as her clothes.

Thus, LLENN became completely pink from top to bottom, like a famous photogenic celebrity couple, even as far as the grim weapon in her hands being pink.

Seeing LLENN like this in town, even though there were people who laughed as they thought it was weird, at the same time, there were also people would call her cute.

There were also those who were curious to know whether she was a boy, or a girl, as her short hair made it hard to recognise her gender.

Of course, LLENN didn't worry about it, as she liked what she had done and thought that this was, after all, inside a game and nobody knew her true self.

However, wearing pink downtown like this was her first, and final time.

LLENN killed another player for the first time, shortly afterward.

LLENN, who had enough fun farming monsters, had no desire for activities like going into a firefight with other players and killing them. She persistently aimed her gun only at monsters. Although this was a game, she did not want to overdo it by „murdering".

That day, LLENN was, as always, farming monsters in a discoloured wasteland by herself.

Although the sun could be seen high up in the slightly cloudy sky, as always, the sky and world were dyed in red, and the morning looked like evening. Setting-wise, during the last war, even the atmosphere of this Earth was destroyed or something.

In a „farming ground“, dotted with tanks that were rusting on the ground littered with rocks, LLENN was waiting for the appearance of monsters.

This time, a monster, which looked like a crocodile with its body changed to a cow's, had settled down in a hole dug under the tanks.

LLENN laid mines around one of the tanks, and fixed thin wires close to the ground. As she had raised her dexterity stat, she became able to set up such a trap.

If a giant crocodile that came out of the hole triggered it, a sound and explosion would notify her.

Then, she would close the distance in one breath, and, nimbly avoiding the attacks of her opponent, she would ceaselessly fire at it from point-blank range. That was LLENN's usual farming technique.

LLENN had free time while she waited, so, as usual, she was listening to music while sitting and leaning against a rock a short distance away. The music player and earphones materialised as items allowed her to listen to the music source data entered into her own AmuSphere.

With her gun in her hands, and clad entirely in pink clothes and equipment, she was the sole person in the wasteland that faded into dusk.

LLENN enjoyed what she would be completely unable to do in reality. Sometimes she would manipulate her menu screen and take out a thermos flask with warm tea from her ≪storage≫, in other words, an item vault, and drink it carefreely.

The storage was a „transparent bag“ kind of thing. Here, items could be

placed, so that the person wouldn't need to carry them on hand.

However, there was a permitted weight limit, determined by her strength parameter, thus one would not be able to store anything and everything. The maximum weight that could be put into one's storage and the maximum weight that she could practically carry herself were the same.

To take out the contents of the storage, it was necessary to wave one's hand in the air and manipulate the screen of a window. No matter how fast one was, such an action would still require several seconds, thus it was impossible to put away weapons and ammunition that one would want to use right away.

Normally, one should fill their storage with weapons and medicine, but——

"Ah, the tea is delicious."

LLENN put in a thermos flask and snacks, even though it decreased the amount of weapon ammunition that she could carry.

In VR games, it was possible to artificially experience even the sense of taste. There was no one who wouldn't use it. As no matter how much one drank and ate, one would never gain weight.

Once the Mozart's piece that she was listening to ended, LLENN switched to „Kanzaki Elza's" album.

Elza was a booming female singer and songwriter.

She was an artist with a clear voice who sang gentle lyrics alongside a melody, which gave the impression of classical music. Under the influence of her friends, Karen also became a complete fan of the singer.

LLENN enjoyed her feminine, light, and perfectly clear singing voice in a world that had fallen into ruins. When that album ended, as she couldn't hear the sound of an explosion, she wondered whether today's ambush had been in vain. But, after enjoying a satisfactory picnic, should she return to the real world?——

Just as LLENN was considering this, humans appeared before her eyes.

Weren't those three men, who appeared around 200 metres away from the other side of the shade of a rock right in front of where LLENN was sitting, walking straight towards her? As they were ascending a slope, she didn't notice them until they climbed up.

All the members were machos without exception, wearing extra clothes with attached protectors that made it look like armour, and each of them carried a large optical weapon on their backs via a *sling*.

In this game, if one encountered other players in a field——

If they weren't very good acquaintances of a close friend, the beginning of the encounter wouldn't be a conversation, but a gunfight. There were even people who would say „Talking via gunfights is what GGO is about!" or something like that.

The three were getting closer.

The other party had several people, who looked somewhat strong. On the other hand, she was alone, and to make matters worse, had no experience in battles against people.

LLENN was engulfed in a fear stronger than when she first encountered a large monster. And at the same time, the number of question marks in her head kept multiplying and exploded.

'Should I run and escape?'

No, before that, the most important one——

'Why were they coming straight towards me? And while carrying guns!'

LLENN continued observing without moving. Before long, the distance separating her and the men decreased to 30 metres, and she could even hear the wind carrying their voices, talking cheerfully about gun performance.

LLENN realised. That „they haven't noticed me". That they were completely unaware of her existence.

The men continued to come closer, and before long, only 10 metres separated them——

The moment, which was extremely unfortunate for them, and which decisively changed LLENN's playstyle in GGO, came.

First of all, and explosion took place behind LLENN, the point the men were advancing towards.

At that moment, the giant crocodile that LLENN was hunting finally fell for her trap. Of course, the men did not know about that. The three men, who were startled by the abrupt explosion and fell into a panic, had their eyes caught by the sand soaring on the other side of the rock, and completely failed to notice that LLENN started moving right before their eyes.

The explosion shook off LLENN's fear. Given the situation, all her actions were already made out of desperation. She decided to leave it all to chance.

LLENN grabbed the gun on her knees, aimed it at the closest man and discharged it in rapid-fire. The man's anti-light bullet defence field weakened LLENN's bullets, but she continued firing at him ceaselessly without any concern, and before long, after who knows how many shots, she managed to hit his face from point-blank range. At that moment, LLENN was within a 2 metre radius of the other two. While looking up towards the tall men, LLENN fired, fired and fired ceaselessly.

And so, when her rage that lasted merely around 10 seconds had settled down, the figures of the three men were no longer there. All of them, shot from extremely close range, had their hit points shaved off, and had „died".

All that remained in the desert was LLENN with her heart pounding in excitement, and the giant crocodile that was hurt by the trap and was growling in pain next to a tank.

Why didn't those three notice me?

Having eased the pain of the giant crocodile, LLENN was troubled for a moment, when,

"Could it be……"

She came up with one hypothesis.

LLENN placed her pink optical gun in the shade of the rock where she had been hiding, then tried moving a little to the side. She understood that her hypothesis was correct with just a glimpse.

It could not be seen. The gun that she placed in the shadow a moment ago.

In the reddish atmosphere of GGO's world similar to a constant evening twilight, LLENN's dusky pink blended in with the rock's tawny brown soil and sand, making it very difficult to see the gun. With the current amount of light, it was completely impossible to see it.

"This is interesting…… This could come in handy……"

LLENN muttered.

Thereafter, LLENN completely stopped wearing *pink* garments in town. As a precaution to avoid revenge.

She instead wore a newly bought, common green combat uniform, with a *robe* that came with an olive brown *hood* that covered her face and entire body. She looked as if she was a child who had put on a blanket and was playing a ghost, but it was of course less eye-catching than an entirely *pink* body.

And then, she would go to a wasteland or desert *field*, change to her favourite *pink* in a place where nobody could see her, and begin her ambush. Basically, she would farm *monsters* just as she did before, but if she happened to see another player——

She would mercilessly switch her prey.

If the opponent moved towards her, she would conceal herself and wait. Without a single twitch.

Then, when she had grasped the number of people that she could kill (though it was usually one, at most two), she would jump out at point-blank range and mercilessly shoot her target until he died.

Right as she started the *game*, she thought „if possible, I don't want to shoot human(-like things)"—— but she had completely forgotten about it.

If it was even slightly unreasonable, whether it was because there were too many of them, or that they wouldn't come close enough, or that their arms were outstanding and the targets were strong etc., then she definitely wouldn't take action. While continuing to hide, she would gradually retreat, and silently let them pass.

Thus, LLENN became addicted to the fun of battling against people.

This reminded her of playing tag, hide and seek or cops and robbers with her siblings and friends when she was a child.

The feeling of her heart pounding while hiding. The feeling of nervousness of being found. And, in addition to those—— a sense of superiority of „shooting her opponents to death".

That's right, was this what fighting seriously in a *game* was about? What enjoying a match was about?

Having deepened her knowledge, LLENN, who had up until now made fun of *gamers* around the world, apologised to them in her mind.

Earning experience points via *monster* farming and battling against players, LLENN further increased her agility stat, thus being able to move more and more nimbly, as well as being being able to run increasingly faster.

LLENN completely didn't notice but——

This *style* of increasing binshō seinō a g i l i t y , or *agility*, AGI for short, was called the ≪AGI superiority theory≫, and these days in GGO, it was judged to be „the most effective build in battles against people".

With her earned *credits*, LLENN procured a live-ammunition gun suited for battles against people.

Using her budget and knowledge to the utmost, what LLENN picked was a ≪*Škorpion vz. 61*≫ made in the old Czechoslovakia.

With its *stock* folded, its overall length was 27 *cm*, and it was one of the smallest and most lightweight *submachine* guns in the world. Although it used a small caliber meant for pistols, just by pulling its trigger the gun could discharge all 30 bullets in a *magazine* in just under 2 seconds. It was a gun that had the *demerit* of having low firepower, but had the *merit* of having a weak recoil, resulting in high accuracy.

LLENN bought „2" of them. She removed both of their *stocks* and, as expected, painted the guns *pink*.

LLENN's way of fighting was „certain kill with one blow", like the sting of a scorpion.

When other *players* came within approximately 10 *metres* of the location she was hiding in—— she would jump out towards her opponents while carrying the *Škorpions* in her hands, and show off her agility.

And then, as she pointed the tip of her muzzles towards her opponents' heads, as if to stab them from below, she would ceaselessly attack. If her opponent was alone - with the *Škorpion* in her right hand; if there were two of them - she would quickly handle the other with the *Škorpion* in her left hand.

In GGO, there was a *system* called ≪*Bullet Lines*≫. In Japanese, it would
d a n d ō y o s o k u s e n
be ≪trajectory prediction lines≫.

This was a red line that would be seen by a *character* who was being targeted by a muzzle, excluding the initial bullet when the victim was not aware of the presence of the assailant, like when they were sniping or ambushing. It was something that enabled one to see the trajectory of the incoming bullets in advance, allowing for evasive action.

Of course, there was no such thing in reality; it was defense *system assistance* function that was created to increase the enjoyment of the *game*.

Seeing the *Bullet Lines* and taking the minimum necessary action to avoid them was the basis of battles against people in GGO.

However, even that wasn't useful in cases of „being shot from around 3 *metres*, when the bullets would be suddenly fired at about the same time the muzzle is aimed".

What LLENN created was a truly vulgar „way of killing", like that of the eastern assassins during the cold war between the east and west, that demonstrated the special characteristics of the gun.

Thus, LLENN steadily increased her spoils at every chance she had. One day she would kill a *monster*, another day, she would decisively kill some poor guy.

And so, eventually…

『An unidentified, dreadful *player killer* has been ambushing in a desert *field*. It's been said that a number of *solo players* have been killed without even getting the time to note the attacker's appearance.』

Such a rumour reached LLENN's ears as she was walking through town while wearing a *robe*.

There was even a notice for the recruitment of a subjugation party that would have someone be a decoy to find the PK bastard and ascertain their true identity. It seems that they even offered a reward.

As expected, this weighed heavily on LLENN, and she stopped her ambushes, which came off as cowardice, in the desert.

Thereafter, she would usually dress in green camouflage and farm *monsters* in a forest *field*, or leisurely enjoy an adventure in some historical site or ruins.

As the third month after she started playing the *game* began——

By playing untiringly, LLENN procured strength that could be said to be on the level of a centre fielder. Though the person herself was not aware of this.

That's when she met the female *player* named „Pitohui".

Chapter 2 – LLENN and Pitohui

"Hey! You ochibi-chan over there. You're really a girl, right? I can tell from the way you walk."

While enjoying *window shopping*, wondering which live-ammunition gun she should buy next, in a gorgeous *shopping mall* in ≪SBC *Glocken*≫, GGO's central city,

"Care for some tea? It will be Onee-san's treat."

LLENN heard a feminine voice calling out to her from behind. She was being seduced.

Onee-san?

What LLENN, wearing a *robe* with a *hood* that hid her face, saw by turning around was——

A tall, though not as tall as herself *IRL*, black-haired, ponytailed, brown-skinned beauty with a brick-coloured *tattoo* on her face.

At this time, her garments were something just a hair's breadth away from being a *bikini*, and with such excessive exposure that it wasn't suited for battle no matter how one looked at it. The garments exposed her slender, firm, *cyborg*-like flesh to those in her surroundings.

While finding it odd that the *tattoo* only covered her face, and wanting to ask why this was so, and moreover, thinking that if that was her own *character*, she would probably have left GGO immediately——

LLENN lowered her guard a little, as the other party was obviously a woman.

In most of the current VR *games*, it was impossible for someone to get a character that was of a different gender from their *RL* one, aside from slight *mistakes* in judging the gender based on the player's brain waves.

There were male *players* who tried speaking to LLENN out of curiosity, but it was unmistakably her first time conversing with a female *player*.

In the first place, GGO was a *game* with overwhelmingly few female *players*. Obviously, LLENN had seen female *characters* from afar, but she hadn't dared to run up to them to hold a conversation.

The brown-skinned beauty smiled sweetly.

"I'm „Pitohui". Everyone's booing about how hard it was to say my name, so just call me „Pito" for short. Ochibi-chan, what's your name?"

"Good day…… I am…… „LLENN"."

"LLENN-chan huh! What a cute name! Oh, and you don't need to use keigo in the *game*! After all, bringing Japanese society-like hierarchical relationship here when you're finally enjoying a different world is such a drag, right!"

This exchange with someone in GGO was LLENN's first conversation.

LLENN went to a *restaurant* in the game where she sat down in a private room with Pitohui, and they had a conversation while having tea and *cake* as a snack. A VR girl meeting, so to speak.

Karen hadn't conversed directly with anyone other than her professors and family for quite some time, but strangely, as LLENN, she became lively in this conversation, which was without keigo. Pitohui's cheerful and frank character reminded her of her friend Miyu.

Firstly, the two carefreely shared their tales of amusement, as well as those of their hardships, eventually culminating in talking about their difficulties due to the scarceness of female *players* in GGO.

Pitohui informed LLENN that, having ended up as a *sexy character*, Pitohui *tattooed* her face, greatly reducing the number of nanpa[13], and thus she recommended this method to LLENN.

LLENN answered by quickly shaking her head, and then,

"I don't have one *IRL* either. Since I wouldn't be able to go to the hot springs if I did!"

[13] Nanpa (ナンパ) is a type of flirting and seduction popular among Japanese teenagers and people in their twenties or thirties. Basically, guys "girl hunting".

Pitohui remarked and showed a sweet smile.

In the first place getting a *tattoo* and removing it in GGO was instantaneous, so, as long as one had the *credits*, it was possible to attempt it as much as one liked.

Pitohui's VR *game* history was much longer than LLENN's, as she had been playing them even during the SAO *death game* turmoil.

And as for GGO, she had been playing it ever since the *service* started 8 months ago. She liked the scenery of a savage world that did not resemble any other VR *games*, so she currently only played this game. However, she had recently been busy *IRL*, so her play time considerably decreased.

Not only was Pitohui LLENN's sempai as a *gamer*, she was also far superior in terms of *player* ability.

Due to the conversation, LLENN was able to open her heart, thus she listed Pitohui as a ≪*friend*≫. With this, they were able to exchange *messages* even if they weren't in the *game*.

More than 3 months after starting to play GGO, LLENN was finally able to find an in-*game* acquaintance. On that subject, after a long while, LLENN remembered that she wanted to resolve her feelings of anthropophobia caused by her height complex, which was the reason she decided to begin playing VR *games* in the first place.

Of course, LLENN had absolutely no idea what kind of person Pitohui was in the real world.

Miyu once told her this:

"Though we're within a VR *game*, the *characters* are still controlled by *real* humans, so a person's nature is still revealed through their speech and

actions. There are no people who'd truly be able to act out a different personality."

Pitohui's attitude did not fully give an impression of her being cheerful and wild.

Thus, LLENN arbitrarily tried *profiling* her as „A good-natured onee-san-type female in her twenties. Working adult. Single" and things like that, but she didn't know if she was right.

After finishing their tea and *cake*, Pitohui asked whether they should „drop out", in other words, return to reality for the day, and LLENN responded to the question by stating that she was looking for a new live-ammunition gun.

"What! In that case, leave it so me! I'll show you a nice shop!"

Pitohui took her to a small shop that she knew.

Just before the end of a narrow road, there was a bar in the outskirts-like, small and messy shop.

However, inside the shop, *rare* and high-powered guns that other *players* would get by exploring ruins and defeating powerful *monsters* were lined-up on display.

"Amazing…… So there are shops likes this too…… And there are guns like these……"

Facing LLENN, who had trouble choosing,

"LLENN-chan LLENN-chan! I recommend this! It arrived just yesterday! Come here! Look!"

Pitohui beckoned her as if she was recommending new cosmetics.

There was a small, high-powered, and reasonably *rare* gun——a P90 there.

The destructive power of the numbers on the accompanying *price tag* was considerably high, thus it was far *over* LLENN's initially assumed budget and she wouldn't be able to drink tea in the *game* for awhile if she bought it, but…

"I'm buying it!"

She decided promptly, with just one glance. And then,

"What is this…… is this really a gun…… it's cute…… It's so very cute……"

Her inner voice leaked out from her mouth.

"Oh? LLENN-chan, you're Hokkaido-born?[14]"

After finishing her shopping session with a pleased expression, and getting a spare *magazine* and a *pouch* to carry it as freebies, LLENN hid the P90 under her black tea-coloured *robe* and continued walking around town while carrying it in her hands.

One could wave their hand, and operate the *window* that appears to place the gun into *storage* to not have to worry about it, but...

"I get it. You want to feel the gun that you've just bought for a while. You want to confirm its existence through touch."

It was just as Pitohui, who was walking by her side, said. She was like a child who hugged a stuffed toy that she had just bought. Wanting to always have it by her side and constantly caress it.

[14] LLENN used the word なまら (namara), a Hokkaido dialect word that means "very much, exceedingly".

"What are you going to do about its name? You are giving it one, right?"

"A-a name? For a gun?"

LLENN looked up at Pitohui.

"Of course!"

"I-I am—— giving it one!"

"Just as I thought. So, what name are you giving to this child?"

After several seconds of silence, LLENN answered in a firm tone.

"„P-chan“"

"Yeah, that's a nice name. In your hands, LLENN-chan, P-chan will bleed a lot of enemies. Because a gun doesn't betray anyone. It only grows greater with the number of kills."

"Yeah, I'll do my best to kill!"

If these words were said in the real world, they would probably appear in the news.

It was about time to return to the *real world*, and LLENN greatly bowed her head to Pitohui.

"Thank you very much, Pito-san. You have been a great help."

"Yeah, no need for keigo. Don't mention it, I'm also happy to make a female friend. I look forward to playing with you. The next time we meet, let's go farming together. I haven't seen the huge alligators in the desert area yet."

"Sure."

'Ah, she's such a nice person.'

While thinking this, LLENN was about to open the *window* to *log out*,

"Oh right, I forgot to say something."

"Hm?"

"Before the next farming run, be sure to paint the P90 *pink*!"

"……"

'Ah, she's the kind of person that you can't let your guard down against.'

While thinking so, LLENN opened the *window* to *log out*.

Thus, LLENN and Pitohui formed a ≪*Squadron*≫.

This was a *team* formed with congenial partners that, in a *fantasy* genre game, would be called a ≪*Guild*≫. It allowed members to fight together, exchange items, and share a matching crest.

Naturally, banding together and fighting as a team in a *game* had various advantages.

For LLENN, who began playing the *game* to improve her social disposition, yet never grouped up with anyone, this was her first *squadron*. Though it was essentially a group consisting of only LLENN and Pitohui.

One month later—— whenever the two were on at the same time, LLENN would go on a farming session with Pitohui.

As opposed to LLENN, who would always be on at around the same time, Pitohui's *play* time was really scattered. There were times when she would be playing on weekdays from morning, and also times when she would never come on during the weekend.

LLENN was curious about the kind of life she led *IRL*, but considered asking to be a violation of *manners*.

Eventually, LLENN realised that Pitohui was an extremely rich *player*.

She noticed this because of the number of guns that Pitohui had. Every time that they played together, the gun that Pitohui used was different.

"Pito-san, what are you using…… today?"

"Oh, it's an ≪L86A2≫. It's a *version* of the British army's *assault rifle* L85 with an enhanced gun barrel and it's a lengthened squad automatic weapon. It only uses a regular *magazine*, but as for differences from a *rifle*, well, its penetration isn't as powerful as a normal gun, but its accuracy rating isn't half bad. Although it's heavy, I like it."

"H-huh……"

"As for my *sidearm* pistol, it's a ≪*Colt Double Eagle*≫! It's a *double-action auto* gun based on Colt's *Government*, but its appearance and ability are poor, so it's not a popular gun! Well, as soon as I heard that it was in GGO, I looked for it! I found out that a *collector* had it, so I piled up my *credits* and bought it!"

Pitohui was a strong *character* who had been playing for a long time, but even so, she possessed a lot of expensive, *rare*, strange and unconventional guns.

One day, during the waiting period of their farming session, LLENN couldn't hold back her curiosity any longer and asked how she obtained that many *credits*.

"Ah, through the ≪*real money trade*≫, of course."

Pitohui quickly told her about it.

Real money trade, abbreviated as RMT, is the act of exchanging the real world's electronic *money* for in-*game credits* and items.

GGO was currently the only VR *game* that officially allowed interchanging in-*game* currency with the real world's electronic *money*.

For that reason, in GGO there were *pro players* who would obtain „sellable" *items* by playing the *game* and selling them to earn a living.

Pitohui took advantage of her RL financial power. Such a playstyle was frequently flamed by people who thought that *games* were about putting in extraneous effort to obtain the items. However, everyone was free to choose their own playstyle, and, most importantly, it wasn't prohibited by the *system*, so though it was sad, they were just the cries of the poorer players who were jealous..

Pitohui was rich in the real world. At the very least, to the extent of inexorably investing in a *game*. LLENN knew just this one thing about her *RL*. Because of this,

"Today's gun is a ≪*Remington* M870≫! Speaking of *pump action shotguns*, it's cliched. Wanna try shooting with it? Come on, shoot!"

"Finally, I got my hands on it! An ≪M16≫! Look closely, it's not an ≪M16A1≫! It the original *model* M16!"

"Today, I've brought five guns, all of them automatic pistols using 9 *mm Parabellum* bullets. I'll explain, firstly this is――"

LLENN was told a considerable variety of details regarding small arms.

She would try firing guns that her strength value allowed her to hold, but

"Well? Well?"

"Yeah. It was fun shooting with it, but……"

"Just as I thought, you're set on P-chan, huh."

"Yeah."

“You’re earnest. LLENN-chan! And here I thought that you wanted to try shooting using all the live-ammunition guns in GGO has to offer!”

Pitohui cried out. And then,

“LLENN-chan, do you know about ≪anti-materiel (t a i b u t s u) *rifles*≫?”

“I have heard the name, but that’s it.”

“Well then, Onee-san shall explain! A taibutsu *rifle, anti-materiel rifle* in English, is well, simply put, it’s a gun that uses the hugest bullets by far."

“What do you mean by huge?”

“Ordinary *assault rifles* have a calibre of 5.56 *mm* or 7.62 *mm*, right, but one that has a calibre of 12.7 mm or higher is usually called a „taibutsu rifle“. These are bullets of a heavy machine gun. They are such large bullets that during World War II, they were equipped on fighter aircrafts.”

“I can’t even imagine it, but if the bullets are big, then the gun’s power is also high?”

“Naturally. 5.56 *mm* bullets can only be used up to around 400 *metres*, 7.62 *mm* bullets can only be used up to around 800 *metres*, but if you use 12.7 *mm* bullets, you can fire at a target that’s over 1000 *metres* away.

“A thousand *metres*? 1 *km*?”

“An unthinkably long distance, right? Of course, the gun is equally large and heavy! The required strength value is extremely high.”

“It’s probably impossible for me, huh……”

“Well, the gun is around as large as you are tall, LLENN-chan.”

"Tee-hee"

"Why are you happy? ——This kind of large rifle was called an ≪anti-tank *rifle*≫ until the Second World War, but then tanks became sturdier and harder to destroy, so they changed its name. It's used as a gun that's suitable for things like long-range sniping, or attacking enemy resources. Although it's big, it can be used by a single person, so it's convenient."

"Hmm. A large gun that can be used to aim far, huh. Then, if you have one, would you be the strongest in the *game*?

"No, not at all."

"What?"

"At any rate, it's large and heavy, so the strength value requirement seems to be equally large. Super long-range sniping itself requires skill. Well, you wouldn't be able to use it if you're not overly absorbed in it, right? Since it's a very very very *rare* gun, you can't let your guard down as a *shock* defeat can cause you to lose it as a *random drop*."

"Even so, Pito-san, you want to have one……"

"Right! I want to decorate the *gun locker* in my room with it! ——In the server, it's said that there are only around 10 guns of this *class*; they are extremely expensive and nobody sells them. Actually, I know one *character* who has one. And what's more, she's a girl *player*."

"What! Leaving aside the gun, the fact that she's a female *player* surprised me."

"She's called Sinon, don't you know her? The blue-haired girl."

"Unfortunately, no."

"Well, it's fine. That Sinon-chan defeated a *monster* somewhere in an underground ruins *dungeon*, and what she she got as a drop was a taibutsu *rifle* called ≪*Hecate* II≫. After hearing that she really really cared for it, I looked for her, found her, and tried saying something to her. „Hello! Sell me your *Hecate* II!" to be precise."

"Pito-saan, did you really think that it was for sale……?"

"It was hopeless! She was such an inflexible girl!

"……"

LLENN knew that Pitohui was extremely *rich* and was a *gun maniac* (and so she had a few problems with her personality), but aside from that, everything else was mostly a mystery.

Once, on the way towards a farming session in a wilderness, LLENN,

"Pito-san, what are your hobbies?"

Inadvertently asked something that made it sound like they were in a formal marriage interview.

"Huh?…… Hmm, aside from this *game*? I don't have any."

She received such an answer from Pitohui.

Since she ended up asking about it, she had to say something about herself——

LLENN shared various things about her own hobby, music, such as that she frequently listed to *classical* music or movie *soundtracks*, that her current favourite singer was Kanzaki Elza, and Pitohui gave a weak reply,

"Music, huh…… I mostly don't listen to any."

"Is that so? That's unexpected……"

LLENN said honestly, and then

"Really?"

Pitohui, giving an expression of surprise, answered.

"For some reason, I arbitrarily thought that you, Pito-san, liked music."

"Hu, would you be surprised if you saw that the *real* me can't even read a musical score?"

"……No, sorry. Let's end the talk about *RL* here."

Apologising, LLENN tried to stop the conversation, but against her expectations, Pitohui said,

"Well, since I have become good friends with you LLENN-chan, I think that we can probably even meet *IRL* and you could teach me in person. A so called *offline* meeting. How about you, LLENN? Do you have the guts, or should I say, resolution for it?"

LLENN thought about her absurdly tall self *IRL* for a few seconds and,

"Pito-san…… you would probably…… be surprised, I think……"

Answered in keigo.

Usually, if she used keigo, Pitohui would definitely tell her off for that, but just this time, she did not say a word about it. Instead, seeing LLENN shrinking her small body, she smiled.

"Then, let's do it! Some day, when you, LLENN-chan, are able to win against me in a head-on match, let's meet *IRL*! Wherever your house is throughout Japan, I'll come to meet you!"

It was a mystery how their talk ended up like this, but LLENN did not dare to retort. Instead,

"Me, beating Pito-san in GGO……? L-like that's ever going to happen!"

"Then promise me! Until then, train yourself in GGO and some day, using P-chan, try to utterly slaughter me!"

"U――understood! No, gotcha![15] Some day, for sure, I am going to, defeat Pito-san."

"Yep, good answer. Then, the oath kinchou![16]"

"Kinchou?"

"Hitting each other's metal as proof of an oath. It was popular in the Edo period[17], don't you remember?"

"Pito-san…… Are you over a hundred and seventy years-old *IRL*?"

"Still a secret. So, if we were samurais, we'd use a katana and a tsuba[18], while girls use mirrors, but we don't have either, so we'll do it with guns! Now! ――One day, we'll take part in a serious match, and if I lose, I'll meet with LLENN *IRL*! That's a girl's promise!"

And so, the two raised their guns in the wasteland. The P90's muzzle and Pitohui's ≪SKS *Carbine's*≫ barrel knocked together and a dry metallic sound resounded.

[15] LLENN first used a -masu verb, but then remembered about Pitohui's hatred of hierarchical society and used a plain verb.
[16] A kinchou (金打) was the act of hitting each other's metal objects to signify that an oath will be kept. In the case of samurais, they would hit each other's sword, while women would use mirrors instead.
[17] The period in the history of Japan between 1603 and 1863.
[18] A tsuba (鍔) is a part of a Japanese sword. An English equivalent would be "sword guard".

At that moment, LLENN did not understand what the smiling Pitohui was thinking, but thought,

'That's impossible, such a day will never come.'

Around 1 month after that promise was made, on 18th January, 2026. While on their way back from a farming session――

LLENN heard about the *Squad Ja*

Chapter 3 – Squad Jam

"A *Squad Jam* is a *battle royale* kind of tournament in ≪Gun Gale Online≫ that pits small *teams* against each other."

"A *battle royale*……? Is that where everyone fights at the same time?"

After hunting down the giant earthworm, LLENN and Pitohui continued their friendly conversation while strolling through a wasteland with no one else in sight.

Of course, they did not lower their guard and vigilance, so they would be able to counterattack immediately if other *players* attacked them. Even LLENN, who would usually look at the face of the person she was talking to, cautiously looked forward and to the sides as they conversed.

"Right. LLENN-chan, do you know about the ≪*Bullet of Bullets*≫? Everyone calls it BoB though."

LLENN nodded.

"Only the name and outline, though."

The BoB was a *battle royale* tournament to decide the strongest *player* in GGO. Thirty people with remarkable abilities who won the one versus one preliminary *tournament* would fight it out in a vast *field* until the last man standing.

Unmistakably the greatest *event* in GGO, with every tournament, the climax grew. There were an awful lot of *players* who wagered their *game* life to participate in it.

Just recently, the third tournament had ended.

Of course, LLENN naturally did not consider participating, so she did not know what kind of *battle* it was. That day, she had gone out with her sister's family, so she could neither *dive*, nor watch the broadcast.

"Speaking of the previous third BoB, well, I also participated. As there was a chance that I wouldn't be able to take part because of *RL* affairs, I didn't tell anyone about it."

"Whaa! How did it go?"

"I dropped out in the preliminaries. And moreover, in the second battle."

"Oh…… what a shame."

"Well, I ended up being sniped, and didn't have any luck either. Anyway, there was a slight change in the final *battle royale*. Two *players* formed a *tag* party and just barely fought to the end."

"Things like that happen too."

"I'll avoid any further spoilers in case, by any chance, you'd want to watch the recordings afterwards, but it was heart-pounding and super

fun to watch to the very end! So exciting!"

"Really?"

Pitohui vehemently praising anything other than guns like this was beyond LLENN's expectations. 'Maybe I should try watching that broadcast video', she thought.

"So, let's get to the main question. ——A certain Japanese person who watched the broadcast of that BoB haughtily thought. 『I wanna see a *team battle royale* like this!』. 『A several versus several battle would undoubtedly be exciting!』"

"Hmmhmm"

"While logged in, that guy sent a message written in English to the GGO management organization, ≪*Zaskar*≫, in the United States of *America*. 『Dear *everybody*, I want to see a *team battle royale*, so please make sure you hold one, Sincerely yours』"

"Don't tell me that such an individual request was approved?"

"Yep, it was. That guy told *Zaskar* that he would cover the necessary costs for hosting the tournament, in other words, become a *sponsor*. Though I can't even imagine just how much did that guy pay. Some of his *RL* details have been identified: the rumour is that he's an abnormal *gun maniac* with a collection of over fifty guns, and a novelist writing solely about the operation of guns."

"Haa…… There are commendable people like that too, huh……"

"Well, a *gun maniac* alone is unusual enough, but a novelist is even more so. What the heck is with such a combination? If you see such a guy walking around town, you'd better arrest him."

"Pito-san…… do you have a violent grudge against the writers around the world or something?"

"Hm? Not really? —— Whether it was because the writer's enthusiasm bore fruit or because *Zaskar* thought that the writer would *pay* for it, *Zaskar* decided „well, let's host a mini tournament in the Japanese server alone, with this private cooperation". The tournament's name is *Squad Jam*, SJ for short. It seems that it was named by that guy, though I don't know if an English name is suitable."

"I see. So it has absolutely nothing to do with ika no shiokara."

"Again with squids. ——The SJ is currently accepting applications for participants, no, participating *teams*, and the deadline for the applications is the 28th, in other words, next Wednesday's noon, with the tournament to be held on the next Sunday, the 1st of February."

"That's very soon, huh…… I wonder, would they get enough people?"

"At present, there seem to be quite a few *teams* who applied right away, so you don't have to worry about the lack of participants in the tournament. As it's the first of its kind, and is an experimental tournament that won't have preliminaries unless far too many *teams* gather, there seem to be quite a few people happy about it, because, even though they couldn't take part in the BoB that's meant only for *solo* tough guys, if this tournament doesn't have preliminaries, they could take part in it as a *team*. On the contrary, the veterans who could participate in the BoB finals, well, they all *passed*. You see, those guys seem to have poor relationships. If they left their backs to someone and fought together, they would probably take a nap and let the others do the work."

"Hmm."

"You're somewhat disinterested, huh? LLENN-chan."

"Because——, this applies to BoB too, but battle tournaments against people are not my kind of thing."

"Nicely said for someone who committed dirty PK in an assassin-style."

"T-that! ——Well……, yeah."

"Yeah, that was well done! ——So, on to the main question."

"Haah……"

"LLENN-chan, take part in SJ!"

"Come again? Me? With you, Pito-san?"

"Well, although it's extremely extremely unfortunate, I can't. On the 1st of February…… a bosom friend of mine from middle school will be holding her wedding. As you can expect, if I abandoned it and participated in a *game* tournament and on the day I'm exposed…… even if I don't die and win the tournament——"

"Yeah, you'd be killed *IRL*, huh."

"Right?"

"In other words, if I looked up the female wedding attendants throughout Japan, I'd find the *RL* Pitohu……"

"Hyaa, you got me! ——Returning to the topic, I want to make sure that you, LLENN-chan, participate! Are you free on that day? You don't have any friend's weddings, or your own wedding or something like that to

attend, do you?"

"I can't affirm it unless I see my notebook, but, probably, I don't, I think……"

"Then take part! Now for the formalities! Since it's a *team* registration, just enter my name and you should be *okay*."

"N-now hold on a second! How did it come to this?"

"Everything is an experience!"

"But, it's a *team* battle, right? I have to fight alongside other people, right?"

"Oh, now you're showing eagerness. That's nice."

"I only asked!"

"Among the *players* I know, there is a strong one. Though he's a guy, well, and a strange one at that, and, frankly, he has the mind of a criminal, he isn't actually a bad guy. But he isn't a nice guy either. Form a pair with him!"

"Wha? Just the two of us?"

"Yep. Just the two of you. Since I can't arrange for anyone else to participate."

"..... Pito-saan, do you really think that I'm going to say 『Yeah! Understood!』 with this?"

"Everything is an experience!"

“No, well……”

“Say, LLENN-chan. In my opinion, LLENN-chan has a lot of problems in real life, right?”

“Wha?”

The surprised LLENN turned to face Pitohui.

Normally, Pitohui would say ‘You're on lookout so don’t look at me!!’, but this time, she didn't.

Although her face was obscured by a *tattoo*, Pitohui gave an expression reminiscent of a kind psychological *counselor* and said,

“*IRL*, something is making you gloomy, right? So, putting it nicely, you came to GGO to vent your anger. Putting it bluntly, you came here to run away.”

“……”

“You're making a „How did you know“ expression, but it was simple to comprehend. ——I’m the same after all!”

“……”

“There are far too many times when I get angry and feel like I can’t do anything, so I go wild. And thus, I shoot with my gun to kill monsters and people to my heart’s content.”

“Pito-san……”

“So you see, ‘if you can do something that isn't possible through any means in the real world, then do it without hesitation!’ is what I’m

trying to say! Are *team battle royale* gunfights possible in the real world? Or more like, would you want to do it in real life?"

To LLENN, who quivered as she shook her head, Pitohui gave a tender smile as if she was persuading a child. Of course, the *tattoo* obscured the middle of her face.

And then,

"So, go wild! If you don't give me an answer by Wednesday morning, I'll assume you're participating!"

* * *

"*Squad Jam*…… What should I do. A personal battle in teams, huh…… I'm kinda reluctant……"

After Karen returned to the real world and muttered this with a sigh mixed in, she first returned the P90 that she held back onto the clothes hanger.

This *air gun* was something that she found by chance on sale on a major *shopping site*, on a certain day the week a fortnight ago. Realising that she could hold the cute P90, or P-chan in her hands even in *RL*, she eagerly ordered it.

She requested the P90 *air gun* and a small P90 *key holder* that appeared on her screen as a „we also recommend this for you" suggestion.

Seeing the *air gun* that arrived the next day, Karen was astounded.

'Huh? Was it always this small?'

'I see, since it's an *air gun*, it could be made far smaller than the

original——'

She thought for merely a few moments. When she realised that LLENN's and Karen's physique were far too different and thus the gun would give a different feeling even when they held the same thing, she felt slightly disoriented.

Despite this, she was still pleased, and even though its colour was black, she would always adorn her room with it. Though, when her elder sister or niece dropped by her room, she would certainly be sure to hide it inside her wardrobe.

As for the *key holder* that she bought at the same time, she ended up using a permanent marker to paint it in *pink*. It became completely like P-chan, and it was really well-made.

She was considering whether to append it to the briefcase that she always brought to school, but——

Considering that there weren't any other female university students who had gun *key holders*, she hung it on the wall of her room.

GGO is fun. It truly is fun.

That is why Karen continued playing, even though she had to pay a 3,000 yen connection fee, which was considerably expensive for this kind of *game*, every month. A lot of things had happened, but now she even had a partner named Pitohui.

However, specifically because it was fun——

When Karen returned to reality, she would always feel down.

VR *games* were a fun dream world, but it was impossible for her to continuously stay within that dream. It was specifically called a „dream world“ because reality exists. If the two were to change places—— reality would probably be a nightmare.

'Isn't it just ironic?', Karen couldn't help but think. That she intended to enjoy the VR *game* she began playing because she wanted to leave the harsh *RL*, but eventually became bitter by savouring the separation from *RL*.

If she had to choose one of the two, she obviously had no choice but *RL*.

In the future, when her studies become hectic, when she has to begin job hunting, when she becomes a working adult, gets married and has children—— she would no longer be able to take refuge in VR *games* no matter what.

In society, people who discarded *RL* and enjoyed VR *games* also existed, but such people were called 『*Net game* addicts』. Good children would never act like that.

So, she should stop playing before the separation from the dream world became painful, or before the worst case of „being unable to separate from it“ comes—— in other words, lately, the option of completely severing her connection with the VR world had been floating about Karen's head. Looking at the long term, she understood that it was the best choice.

As for participating in the SJ, she honestly had no interest in it at all.

Firstly, just being able to savour logging in to GGO as a *virtual chibi*, and battles, with just *monsters* as opponents were fun enough.

She did not deny the fun she had when she became addicted to fighting against people for some time, and it was true that her heart would pounding a little when it came to matches against strong opponents, but—— nevertheless, she didn't think she could actively pursue it.

Besides, although he was recommended by Pitohui, she didn't feel like teaming up with an unknown male *player* to participate in the tournament at all. She didn't feel that they would be able to work cohesively as a team. He could be aiming to win rather than just participating, but Karen felt that she would hinder him considerably.

Of course, Karen did understand her[19] words that „it's a challenge towards a new self and so on" quite well.

At any rate, that is the reason why she began playing VR *games* after all. If she ran away now, what would she do then?

However, wouldn't refusing SJ be a good opportunity to quit the *game* in its entirety?

On the other hand, isn't it fine to continue playing a little, at least while I'm still a student and don't have to begin job hunting? My parents and siblings did say that I should pursue my hobbies a bit longer, and this certainly counts as one, right?

Karen continued back and from with her conflicting thoughts. After several minutes of thinking endlessly about it, which only resulted in her getting tired, Karen,

"Haah……"

Sighed, and decided to rely on her friend in her time of need——

[19] Referring to Pitohui.

So she tried calling Miyu, her VR *game* sempai and friend who was playing ALO.

『Heya! Kohi!』

Luckily, Miyu had come to this world.

Karen calmly got her worries off her chest by expressing herself to the only girl that she could consult with regarding this matter.

"What do you think is the best thing to do? As you're my VR *game* sempai, I hope to hear your unreserved opinion."

『In that case, if you find it fun, you should just continue!』

Her reply was resolute.

『While you're troubled about which one to choose, you'll regret it no matter which choice you make, right? You see, humans tend to think too highly of the alternative that they did not choose. So, I think you should just decide what to choose by throwing a *coin*.』

"I see…… Then, what if…… you are against the results of the coin toss? If you feel like you don't want to follow the decision of the *coin* god?"

"Well in that case, it would mean that the innermost depths of your heart desires the other option, right? That's what you should choose then. It's simple, right."

"Ah…… I see……"

『If you don't mind me openly expressing my arbitrary desires, I prefer being able to talk about *games* with you, Kohi. Yeah, sorry for being

really selfish』

'Even if I refuse to take part in SJ, could I continue GGO for a bit more?'. As Karen considered this,

『Huh? But you know, the 1st of February is Kanzaki Elza's live performance, ain't it? Didn't we say that if we got tickets, we'd attend it?』

"Wha!"

In response to Miyu's words, Karen hastily opened her notebook, and saw that she had indeed wrote that down. She had forgotten.

She had never been able to buy *tickets* for Kanzaki Elza's *live concerts*. The venue was never wide, so the *tickets* would undoubtedly be worth platinum. Karen couldn't help but think that Elza should perform at a bigger venue, not necessarily a baseball *dome*, but at least a slightly larger *concert hall*.

Miyu was currently in the process of trying to obtain the long-since sold out *tickets* at a reasonable price via an *Internet auction*.

"You're right, I forgot, sorry…… If you get the *tickets*, I'll, of course, turn down the tournament. Let's go together. You can stay at our place."

『Yeah. ——But, what are you going to do if I don't get them? Frankly put, based on my experience up till now, the chances of getting them is *fifty-fifty*, you know?』

"When will you know that?"

『Tuesday, at 16:00』

What *timing*.

Karen decided to have that as the *coin toss* for whether she should participate in the SJ. On this occasion, she'll ignore the outcome for whether she should continue to play the *game*.

"In that case…… you tell me then! If you get the *tickets*, I'll turn down the *game* tournament!"

Tokyo continued to have fine days in January.

To Karen, who was born and raised in Hokkaido, the fact that winter in Tokyo was completely without humidity was more unexpected than the fact that winter wasn't cold. However, she didn't really like that her throat began to hurt, her skin became rough and she had to go through the trouble of using a humidifier to protect herself from those effects.

The distance between her apartment unit and university was less than 2 *kilometres*. She could cross that short distance in just one stop using the subway, but aside from days with really bad weather, Karen usually walked. It was much better than seeing herself reflected in the train's window, and it was good for her health.

27th of January. Tuesday, just before 16:00.

With lectures over, and as the early winter evening drew near, Karen was walking within the university grounds.

Of course, it can't be said that she was alone.

Around her, there were plenty of merry voices of people getting together to have a drink later, or of club gatherings, but their talk had nothing to do with Karen. Their conversations were in a different world.

Wearing *jeans, sneakers*, and a light *coat*, Karen walked under the roadside trees with nothing but their branches left, and tried to return to her room quickly.

Karen noticed six female high school students coming from the direction where she was headed for. As they had matching uniforms and were within the school premises, she realised that they were pupils of an attached high school[20] that was on the same premises.

It was no longer rare for her to pass by the six of them; and since she started going to university last summer, she had seen them about twice or three times per week. Karen recognised them.

Basing on the really large *sports bags* in their hands, Karen guessed that they were probably part of some sports club. The university's gymnasium was large, so they sometimes had joint practice with high school pupils.

One of them was a Caucasian with beautiful, fair hair and blue pupils. Was she an overseas student, or a foreigner living in Japan? Either way, it wasn't a rare sight in this school.

The girls were all short——, no, for their age, it was probably „normal", but compared to Karen, they were all small, slender, and most of all, sweet. Often laughing, often chatting, they were walking merrily. Alongside friends from a similar school-club, they gave the refreshing feeling of being in their prime of youth.

If Karen wasn't the girl she is now, would she be in her springtime of life too?

[20] An attached high school is basically a school that is attached to/affiliated with a higher education institution (e.g. a university). They may share the same premises and, as far as I understand, graduates of the university aiming to be teachers may be employed at the school and the university faculty may use the school for research purposes.

Considering this, she couldn't avoid having gloomy feelings. Of course, the girls hadn't done anything wrong.

While looking at the rapidly approaching six girls with their merry voices, Karen hastened her pace to return to her room quickly. She'll probably get in touch with Miyu very soon and find out whether or not she obtained Kanzaki Elza's *live* performance *tickets*.

After the quiet Karen passed by the lively six girls without crossing paths,

"Hey, you there——"

The voice of one of them reached Karen's ears.

"You're tall——"

Karen had no desire to hear what she had to say after that.

Karen covered her face, hasted her pace, and ran away from that spot.

At the same time, a single desire welled up

'I want to shoot them. I want to shoot, all six, of those girls.

Her right hand searched for P-chan that was usually held in front of her body, but only cut the air in vain.

Karen returned to her room to run away, closed the door, and the moment the door was automatically locked, her *smartphone* vibrated.

The *message* from Miyu was,

『No dice!』

Merely that single phrase.

Karen went in front of the *personal computer*, and the moment that it booted up, she started GGO.

The *message* to Pitohui was,

『I'm gonna go wild!』

Merely that single phrase.

*　*　*

The 30th of January, Friday night, past 20:00.

Karen finished an enjoyable meal with her elder sister, brother-in-law and niece and left the room.

Her four-year-old niece pestered her to watch an anime movie on TV together, but Karen,

"Sorry. Onee-chan has homework to do."

Told her such a lie, and went from her sister's room[21] upstairs to her own room that was downstairs.

And then, she crossed over from the real world to the VR world.

[21] The original phrase was 階数の高い姉一家, but we weren't sure how to interpret it. If anyone is more knowledgable about housing in Japan, we would appreciate your help.

"Yaho! LLENN-chan! You really are the kind of girl that I'd thought you'd be!"

In a bar in the central city SBC *Glocken* where they agreed to meet, LLENN had her shoulders pat on by Pitohui. Being pat by the tall Pitohui from above, although it wasn't the case, it seemed LLENN's already small stature shrunk even further.

"Ouch, that hurts Pito-san! ——Anyway, I did come……"

Having said that, she surveyed the dim and narrow private room. There was no one else there.

"Ah, LLENN-chan, you're looking for your partner, huh. Sorry, he'll be coming soon, so wait a bit. As always, the drinks are on me."

"Thanks. ——Is he still shopping somewhere?"

While sitting in front of Pitohui, LLENN casually asked. By „somewhere", she meant somewhere within GGO.

"Nah, still in *RL*. He was asked to do something there."

LLENN was considerably surprised at the similarly casual answer.

As she knew that he had things to do in real life and would be a little late, does it mean that he's „a man that she is intimate with even in the *RL*"? In that case…… boyfriend? Lover? Husband? Or is it possible that he's her son or father?

In order not to show surprise on her face and for her thoughts not to be reflected on her mouth, LLENN drew the *ice tea* placed at the centre of the *table* towards herself and put the *straw* in her mouth.

Compared to the real world, the senses in this world were lacking, but what she felt in her mouth was indeed cold and sweet *ice tea*. What's more, no matter how much she drank, she wouldn't get plumper and didn't have any need to go to the *toilet*.

Pitohui, who was gulping down a tropical fish-like overly vivid-coloured *cider*, said

"Have you read SJ's *rules*? With your personality LLENN-chan, I'm sure you've read it from A to Z, but I'm just making sure."

While thinking that her personality was read, LLENN gave a positive answer.

Because she completed the procedures for participating, she received a *message* with the *rules* from the management company *Zaskar*. LLENN didn't just skim through it, but read through the whole thing.

SJ's *rules* were basically based on the individual *battle royale* BoB. Though in some parts, there were notable differences.

Summarising the identical points——

『The participants (*teams*) will be transferred at the same time to the match area at least 1,000 metres apart from any other participant (*team*). The participant (*team*) that survives to the end is the victor.』

『The stage is a special *field*. Although the circumstances will be unknown until the tournament begins, the stage will have various terrain. There will be both advantageous and disadvantageous terrain, but as the transfer is completely *random*, it all depends on luck.』

『As for the weapons that the *characters* can possess within the *game*, the player is free to choose whatever they wish. In other words, it's possible to bring not only guns, but explosives, knives and so on. The vehicles dotting the *field* may also be freely used.』

『Normally, the corpse would be broken down and destroyed, but during the *game*, the corpses will remain along with a 【Ｄｅａｄ】 *tag*.』

『Normally, after a player dies, there would be an *item* drop called ≪*random drop*≫ and if the weapon isn't picked up by comrades, no matter how valuable the gun was, it would be lost forever, but during the tournament there won't be such a feature.』

『In order to prevent people (*teams*) from one-sidedly running away and secluding themselves somewhere, a ≪*Satellite Scan*≫ will be performed. Setting-wise, this will be a scan done by an artificial satellite, and on the very day, the participants will be given a portable terminal, which will display the position of their opponents at fixed intervals for a short amount of time.』

"Do you have any questions so far?"

While pointing at the *rule* screen that was displayed in the air, Pitohui asked, and LLENN answered.

"None. Though I am a bit uneasy about how to use the *satellite scan* terminal."

"It isn't that hard, if you've used a *smartphone*, you'll be fine. Now then, about the important, SJ-only *rules*——"

As for the different points, the first would of course be the number of participants.

『Individual participants are not approved; the participants must form a *team* of two to six people.』

『Attacks against comrades, in other words, friendly fire deals *damage* as normal.』

『Communication items that were forbidden in the BoB may be used for the *team* battle. Of course, communication with those outside or dead *players* is impossible.』

Pitohui pointed her finger at her left ear.

"We have the continuous call communication *items*. It's the thing that you and me used before."

"Understood."

LLENN nodded.

A continuous call allowed „talking" and „listening" to each other, in short, it was an ordinary telephone-like communication device.

An ordinary radio only allowed one-way communication when the *button* was pressed to talk.

Of course, with a continuous call, everyone's voices can be heard at all times, so as the number of people increases, it only becomes a nuisance. That's why a radio is the preferred choice, but with just two of them, a continuous call would probably be more convenient.

As for the next big difference,

『In SJ, corpses will disappear after 10 minutes and the *player* will return

to the bar.』

"Well, that's probably because this isn't a *severe* tournament like the BoB. With the BoB where a large amount of money is bet, the player's consciousness remains on standby in the corpse until the victor is decided, as a precaution to prevent any information leak."

"Hmmhmm. In SJ, even if you die quickly, you don't need to wait for the tournament to end, huh."

"If you die quickly, I'm not going to forgive you, you know?"

"Hah! I am going to fight until my last breath!"

"Good."

The *satellite scan* time was also changed.

『In the BoB, the *satellite scan* interval was 15 minutes, but it will be shortened to 10 minutes in this tournament.』

"This is because they want to shorten the time needed for the tournament. The BoB always takes around 2 hours for the conclusion to be reached, but this tournament definitely won't take that long. It will begin on Sunday from 14:00…… and will probably end within an hour."

"That fast?"

"According to my insight."

"Should you really be saying that yourself……?"

"Well it's fine. So, if you survive for more than an hour in this tournament, it's already a considerable feat."

"I see. Since the participants are *team*, it will probably instantly end up in a flashy gunfight ……"

"Yeah. Right after the start of the *game*, the enemies will be at least 1 *km* away, but with a full power dash, the distance can be closed quickly, so you can't let your guard down. In a place with a good visibility, a sniper rifle's bullets can come flying at you from 800 *metres* away, while *machine gun* bullets could come from 600 *metres*. ——Well, at that distance, you can practically leave it all to the guy that you're going to be fighting with."

After mentioning the partner that hadn't arrived yet whom LLENN didn't know, Pitohui,

"So, now for the perhaps most important SJ *rule*! Right, this will be on the *test*!"

Pointed at the screen while saying that. If what was written there was summarised,

『The *satellite scan* displays only the position of the *squad leader* (buntaichō squad leader). Also, in the BoB the name of the *player* would be displayed if the light dot was touched, but this time the *team*'s name will not be displayed.』

"What does that mean?"

"A *team* has six members at most, but if all the members are indicated, you probably won't be able to understand a thing as the screen would overflow with dots."

"I see……"

"So, only the location of the *leader* will be indicated. What meaning could that have? Yes, LLENN-chan."

Being named by Pitohui like a teacher, LLENN answered after thinking about it for a few seconds.

"Even if the other *team members* were lurking somewhere, you wouldn't know until you saw them…… Rather, the *leader*'s position can be used as a trap to draw in one's opponents."

"Right! As expected of the antlion pit-like *trap* scoundrel, LLENN-chan! You're quick to understand!"

"No, forget about that……"

"And yet I was praising you! That ruthless attack without a care for other people's feelings! How exciting!"

"Can we return to the conversation? ——So, the significance of the *satellite scan* has considerably changed from the individual matches of BoB."

"Right. However, if the remainder of the *team* become scattered, it only becomes a disadvantage."

"Gotcha…… Teacher, I have a question!"

"Yes, LLENN-kun."

"If the *leader* dies…… what happens then? ——Does the *team* lose at that moment?"

"No, in that case everyone would be unhappy, right? A *leader* whose

location was confirmed could probably be exterminated in one hit by a sniper and die. So, in that case, the same thing happens just like it does in an actual war."

"Which means?"

"You see, in the army, if a squad leader is killed in action, the next highest-ranking person, or if there are people with the same high rank, the one who was given that rank first, takes over the right to command. In other words, in SJ the person ranked second, then third based on the rank assigned in the *team*, would automatically take over."

"I see. Then, in our *team* of only two people, there's no need to worry. Even so, we're really participating with just two people……"

"Right. Do your best. It would be cool if you won with just the two of you."

"Haah."

"Additionally, there's a rule that „the only one who can surrender is the *leader*, and in that case, the whole *team* surrenders", but well, that doesn't really concern you and your partner right, LLENN-chan. It means that if the number of people decreases and the odds of winning diminishes, the team can just leave instantly."

"Hmmhmm"

As LLENN finished drinking what little remained of her *ice tea*, she began slurping with the *straw* held in her mouth. And then,

"That's all about the rules. Squad leader LLENN-dono."

At those words, LLENN thought she would spit out the contents of her

drink. After gulping something down and widening her eyes,

"He? Ha? Fu?"

"Are you practising the pronunciation of the ha-row?"[22]

"That's not it! ——I'm the *leader*? Why? Is the person I am teaming up with weaker than me?"

"You're starting to use keigo again. No no. Of course that guy is a strong *player*."

"Then, why……?"

To LLENN, who had a question mark on her face, Pitohui who had a *tattoo* on her face answered.

"That's a secret! Well, it's part of the plan."

"……"

LLENN couldn't say anything more than that, and the private room suddenly became quiet.

And then,

"Sorry. I'm late."

A hoarse male voice could be heard, and a giant man entered the room.

[22] Refers to the classification of the kana syllabary.

Chapter 4 – A Man Named M

Seeing the man who opened the *curtains* and entered the private room,

"……"

LLENN wondered whether a bear had just come in.

The man was a giant, easily exceeding 190 *cm* in height.

He was wearing camouflage *pants*, with a combination of green, brown and black gaudy dots, as well as an entirely brown T-*shirt*.

He had absolutely no equipment on, but even so she felt his *macho* nature. On top of being tall, he was also big, and had a bulky chest. His chest was so bulky that it seemed like he had a bulletproof plate underneath his skin. The arms that came out of the T-*shirt* sleeves were like logs, and were probably larger than LLENN's *waist*.

What made him look like a bear was his head. His *wavy*, deep, tawny-brown hair was so long that it reached his shoulders, and was so thick that it covered his head.

His eyes were relatively round and big, but did not show any sign of gentleness.

He was considerably old, seemingly over forty. Of course, one's *avatar*'s appearance had absolutely no relationship with one's true age *IRL*, so he could just as well be a male high school student in the real world as he could be an eighty-year-old ojii-chan.

In the world of GGO, a *game* made in America, such a *body builder*-like super *macho avatar* wasn't rare. LLENN happened to see them frequently in town, but meeting one so close was considerably scary.

However, it was interesting that even with this appearance, if, for example, he had just started the *game* and had a low strength value, even

guns that LLENN could equip would be heavy for him and he wouldn't be able to wield them. Well, Pitohui did say that he was „strong", so such a case was unlikely. Thinking about it in general, he should have been playing at least as much as she did, if not longer.

"Ou, hey you're late."

"Sorry, Pito. It's just that I had to finish all of my errands."

His deep voice and blunt answer were also considerably scary to LLENN. Until now, she had never faced such a large human in her life. It reminded her of the time in her childhood when she saw a black bear on the other side of the *glass* in a zoo.

LLENN thought that she couldn't handle having such a dreadful partner and considered if she should withdraw from SJ. Of course, that would be rude to both Pitohui and him, and moreover, she had decided by herself to take part, so she reconsidered. Besides, he wasn't an enemy, but an ally.

"Okay. Come on, sit over here."

As Pitohui said that, she stood up and handed her own seat to him. The giant standing at the entrance to the private room exchanged places with Pitohui, scooted along the narrow *seat*, and sat in front of LLENN.

"LLENN-chan, let me introduce you! This idiotically and absurdly gargantuan——"

The moment LLENN heard that, her heart hurt for just a moment. Because, in *RL*, that was exactly how she looked like. Of course, Pitohui wasn't at fault here. Since concealing *RL* details and being able to play is what VR *games* were about.

"guy is the one who is going to fight alongside you this time—— come on, introduce yourself."

Pitohui's attitude towards the man was considerably high-handed. She didn't know what kind of relationship the two had, but it seemed to LLENN that Pitohui's position was far higher *IRL*.

The giant man gave a light bow and,

"Nice to meet you. My name is M. I look forward to working with you."

Introduced himself like that. His appearance was scary, but his manners were awfully polite. The astonished LLENN also answered in keigo after bowing.

"Nice to meet you. I am LLENN."

And then, the two became quiet. It seemed that this man named M wasn't as sociable as Pitohui.

'Kinda hard to converse, huh. Well, Pito-san will interject, so it should be fine, right?', LLENN thought when,

"Well then, I've got errands to run. I leave the rest to you two young ones!"

Pitohui, who was at the entrance to the private room, left with a line similar to that of a formal marriage interview.

"Wha? H——"

Before LLENN could even respond, Pitohui ended up exiting and leaving without delay.

All that remained was an unexpected unpleasantness.

It wasn't as if being alone with a male was dangerous. In VR *games*, a

person who came in physical contact with someone of the opposite gender would result in a ≪*harassment*≫ warning. If the person did not abide by this warning, the penalty increased, and would ultimately result in the *account* being suspended.

Since puberty, Karen barely had any experience with talking to a member of the opposite gender with no one else around. The reason it wasn't *zero* was because she had two older brothers, and after her sister married, a brother-in-law as well. Thanks to that, she didn't have a phobia of males such that she absolutely couldn't talk to them, but…

"……"

It wasn't an atmosphere where she could take the initiative to say something. The other party looked like a giant who would end up eating her from top to bottom.

At the same time, she somehow ended up understanding the feeling of people who saw her in *RL*, and felt a bit gloomy again.

As LLENN was thinking „I really want to *log out* and escape" with downcast eyes, something reached her ears,

"Em……, well, you shouldn't…… be so tense, le-let us go. No, let's go…… If I use keigo, that bastard Pitohui…… will beat me to a pulp."

A stuttering voice with tension mixed in. Naturally, it was M's voice.

'Ah, I'm not the only one who's scared', LLENN felt a bit relieved. This large man also imagines being beaten to a pulp by Pitohui—— violence isn't good, but it was a slightly heartwarming scene.

"Ah——yes. I mean, yeah, so please."

Looking a person in the eyes when talking was a *rule* of the Kohiruimaki household. Her businessmen parents had strictly taught her that. While

looking at M's rough face, LLENN,

"Since we decided to participate with all our might, I'm looking forward—— to your help. M-san."

"Me too. Since we're aiming for victory, let's do our best. LLENN—— can I drop the honorifics? I, quite dislike…… attaching -chan to others names."

LLENN nodded. It seemed that M's personality wasn't as scary as his appearance.

'I wonder, what kind of person is controlling this rough *character* in real life? LLENN's interest was sparked again, but she threw out her thoughts with her best efforts. If she continued thinking about that, she thought she'd end up carelessly asking about it again.

"What have you heard from Pito? Before I came, what were you talking about?"

Seemingly having conquered his tension as well, he took the *glass* of *ice coffee* that came from the hole after he requested for it, and then talked to her very normally.

Having the feeling „This person is my oji-san. An older person that I can talk casually with.", LLENN decided to talk.

"Re-confirming the *rules* of SJ, the use of wireless items, and for some reason, the fact that I became the *leader*."

"I see. Anything about the reason for us meeting face-to-face?"

"Nothing yet."

LLENN answered as she shook her head.

Speaking of which, what was the reason?

Without saying the reason, Pitohui had asked if she was free for 3 hours from 21:00 on Friday. As Pitohui would be attending a wedding on the day of the tournament and would probably be busy, LLENN was glad that she was introduced to M before that, but there probably was no need for it to go on for 3 hours. Moreover, contrary to her expectations that the three of them would go *monster* farming to deepen their friendship, Pitohui had left quickly.

At LLENN's answer,

"Honestly."

M let such a reaction slip out, and laughed lightly. His grim expression, even if just a little, loosened up, and LLENN had strange thoughts like 'ah, even such a *character* can laugh' and 'there are *graphics* prepared for laughing'.

"Neither of us know each other's abilities. I've heard a bit from Pito, but I want to go to the practice grounds and confirm it."

A practice ground was a place that was literally as the name implied.

In a *field* where various terrain and buildings could be selected, unlike indoor shooting ranges, it was possible to practise movement and long-range shooting, making use of the terrain adapted for actual combat, and it was possible to practise without dealing *damage* to each other. And there was no worry that they would be attacked and killed by *monsters* or other *players* during that time. However, to use it, reservation was necessary, and the fee was considerably high.

"I see. ——But, no matter what, one thing concerns me……"

"What?"

"Why am I the *leader*? I mean, without confirming it, I may not have, such a capability, right?"

As LLENN was complaining frantically with her small body, M laughed a bit again.

"No worries. There's a plan, so you're just the leader in name only. I'll handle the actual operational command."

Just before Friday turned to Saturday, Karen returned to the real world.

Having grown back to her large body, she slowly confirmed her real sensations and then stood up and turned on the room's lights.

As she was absentmindedly looking at the black P90 hanging on the wardrobe,

"That was like a tryout…… wasn't it?"

Karen muttered.

For approximately 2 and a half hours, LLENN was asked by M to do various things.

The two of them went to the reserved practice grounds. It was a wasteland with a crazy-coloured sky and where rocks and abandoned vehicles stood out. In the distance, there was a mountain with inclined *buildings* and with *craters*. In appearance, there wasn't anything different from a normal *field*, but there was an approximate 2 *km* movement range restriction, and there should be a transparent wall that „does not allow one to advance any further".

"Put on all your equipment. Also, give me a communication *item*."

Were M's first words. LLENN operated her menu screen, and materialised the equipment held in her *storage*. Her usual *pink* combat uniform and P90. While changing clothes, those currently worn would temporarily vanish, so one would only be dressed in underwear in that moment, but it was fine as long as a *robe* was equipped .

And so, LLENN was asked to do various things.

『40 *metres* ahead, there's a *drum* can. I want you to aim for its centre, and shoot while standing. 10 bullets slowly in *semi-auto*, 10 bullets as fast as possible. And the remaining 30 bullets in *full auto*.』

『There's 200 *metres* from here to that abandoned *truck*. There are hard rocks underfoot. I want you to sprint towards the truck with all you have while carrying the P90. When you *touch* the *truck*, sprint back here with all you have.』

『This time, shoot while running. Sprint with all you have towards the *drum* can, and at my instruction, discharge your entire magazine in *full-auto* while running. When you have 8 bullets or less in your *magazine*, immediately reload.』

『By eye-estimation, how many *metres* do you think separates you and that sharp rock? How about the hole on the other side?』

Up to this point, she understood it as 'ah, he's examining my fighting ability', but

『There's nothing beyond this point. I want you to close your eyes and walk. As normally as possible, and in a fixed manner. Upon my instruction, turn based on the angle I give you.』

『Slow walk, normal walk, jog, sprint with all you have——at my instruction, switch from one of these four to the next.』

『I want you lie down on your face. Once 1 minute or more has passed

and I abruptly give you the signal, stand up and run in the direction I indicate. Upon the next signal, lie down on your face again.』

『Run as fast as you can backwards. There are stones, so if you trip, rotate to fall to the ground with your stomach.』

『Crouch and roll into a ball as small as possible. And then, try rolling along a hill road.』

When he said things like that, LLENN didn't understand what it would be useful for.

In the world of a VR *game*, no matter how much one moved, it wouldn't result in physical fatigue. If the brain gave an order to „run as fast as possible", the body could continue to run for as long as one liked, as if it was operated with a *controller button*.

LLENN had completely no idea what he was doing, so, although she was mentally exhausted, she did as she was told.

"Yeah, I get the picture now. Thanks."

As LLENN was thinking whether it was over with this, M called out his *storage* operation screen, and called out his own gun.

What appeared in front of his eyes was a large and strange-looking *rifle*.

It was big, long *rifle* with a lot of rough ups and downs. It gave LLENN the impression of a construction site machine. A seemingly solid *bipod* and *scope* were attached.

As for its colour, it had a tawny-brown and green camouflage coating. As it was discoloured here and there, and its colours were fading as it was chafed, she could surmise that it had been used for a considerably long time.

“Is that your *main arm*, M-san? It’s the first time I've seen it, what’s it called?”

LLENN asked, thinking that it looked strong, but heavy, and that she probably wouldn’t be able to equip it.

Having finished the *check* up on his gun, M initially answered by giving the gun's name alone. Having placed the M14 EBR at his feet, he provided additional explanation while performing the process for materialising his equipment.

“EBR are the initials for *enhanced battle rifle*. As the name implies, it’s an „enhanced version” of the old M14 *battle rifle*. Its calibre is 7.62 mm.”

Hearing that, while ruminating what she was once taught by Pitohui,

“So, M-san, your battle *style* is…… firing in *semi-auto* at middle range?”

LLENN asked to be sure.

Before she began playing GGO, LLENN had completely no knowledge on guns, but now she knew a lot.

What she was taught in the *tutorial* and reviewed with Pitohui was——

『Based on the gun’s calibre, and based on the type of gun of the same calibre, the effective distance of the gun changes. Pay attention to your own, and your opponent’s, gun calibre and type.』

This.

An effective range, crudely put, was „the greatest distance where the gun could hit and deal damage“. Its meaning was completely different from just the „greatest range“ that the bullet could physically cross.

7.62 *mm class* bullets had a lot of power and were most suited for mid-range sniping.

"That's right, basically, in open places I like to fight by keeping my distance from the opponent. Of course, even if it came to a close-range battle, I will use the EBR, but for indoors and the like, I have this."

A strengthened *plastic holster* appeared on M's right thigh as he explained.

Inside, was a big, black automatic pistol. M M moved the M14 EBR onto his shoulder via the gun's *sling* and drew the pistol out of the *holster* with his right hand.

It was impossible for a gun taken out of *storage* to be loaded, so M pulled the *slide* with his left hand, and loaded the first bullet into the gun's chamber.

After he raised the small *lever* where his thumb was and activated the safety, M showed the gun's side to LLENN.

"It's an ≪HK45≫ made by the German company *Heckler & Koch*. A 45 calibre automatic. The *magazine capacity* is 10 bullets. If you raise this *lever* on the right side, the safety will be activated, horizontal to fire. You might need to use it when it's important, so I want you to remember that."

M explained this far more carefully than about the M14 EBR, but LLENN thought 'well, I probably won't need to use it'.

Even so, she remembered the user guide. If that small *lever* is raised, the safety will be activated.

GGO *players* don't really activate the safeties on their guns. If you didn't do that in *RL*, it would be dangerous, so it couldn't be helped, but this was a *game* world. Rather than the danger of an accidental discharge, it

had the *merit* of allowing one to promptly counterattack.

LLENN was also always like that; whenever she went out to the *field*, she'd immediately load her P90, and set her *selector* and safety to the „*full-auto*" position.

When she was moving, she would extend her index finger and keep it away from the trigger, and when she was attacking, with delicate *control* of the trigger, she'd fire 3~5 bullets at a time.

M returned the HK45 to his *holster*, and continued to materialise his remaining equipment. This included a *vest*, with a bulletproof *plate*, on his bulky body, and a *backpack* so large that it seemed like it could even be used to go mountain climbing, and further increased the volume that occupied this world[23]. On his head, he had a *bush hat* that had the same camouflage pattern as his clothes.

On his *vest*, excessive M14 EBR *magazine pouches* were attached. As his body was big, it was possible for him to attach a lot of *pouches*. A total of, eight or more. A considerable number of spare magazines.

The *backpack* also greatly swelled out, but she didn't know what was inside. Well, it's probably not lunchboxes, so probably something necessary for fighting.

Having finished his preparations, M,

"Now then, from this point on, I'll have you stand an indicated distance: 20 *metres*, 50 *metres*, 100 *metres*, away."

"Okay. And then?"

"I'll fire with my EBR in various directions. Before I shoot, I'm going to say the direction that I'll shoot in."

[23] Seems to be a fancy way to say "spawned more stuff to crowd the world with"

"Come again? Then…… W-what should I do? Run away with all I have?"

Mistaking that she might have become a target for shooting practice, LLENN asked in a hurry, but the answer was unexpected.

"I want you to pay attention, listen, and feel the sounds."

"Sounds? The gunshots?"

"Right. You might know this, but in GGO, gunshots at point-blank range are considerably toned down when compared to the equivalent in *RL*."

LLENN nodded. She had heard this from Pitohui before.

That the gun depiction was based on *RL* guns was GGO's distinguishing characteristic, but the volume alone wasn't completely reproduced.

If it wasn't so, no one would be able to talk while shooting, and it would unmistakably lead to people becoming deaf one after the other.

"However, although the volume of gunshots is toned down to some extent, in other words to the level that that they would result in *damage* to one's ears, the decay based on location and distance is reproduced based on how it is in *RL*. So, if you are familiar with it, you can determine how far the opponent is shooting from."

"I see."

"From this point on, I'll have you learn how a sound changes based on the distance, and practise grasping the sense of approximately how far away, and from which direction your opponent is shooting from. After I shoot for a bit, I'll have you close your eyes. I'll move and shoot without notice. I want you to guess, as accurately as possible, how far away I am and where am I aiming at."

'What the, that sounds hard', LLENN thought, but 'well, I'll just have to do it. It's better than being shot at. If what we did earlier was an athletics *test*, then this is music, right.

"Gotcha……"

"After we're done with that, I'll do the same thing, but with cover, like rocks, abandoned vehicles and houses, in between. I want you to learn the differences in how it sounds."

'Uwaa, that sounds awfully hard.' LLENN shouted in her mind.

*　*　*

Saturday, the day after the „tryouts" ended, Karen had nothing to do other than her university studies. And she even finished that in the morning.

Karen, who had tons of free time, was glancing fleetingly at her *AmuSphere* placed at the side of her *bed* but,

"Yeeah……, I'll pass today."

Decided to pass *play*ing GGO.

She could go *monster* farming even if she was alone, but in the 1 in 10,000 chance of being attacked by other *players*, there was a possibility that she would be killed if she did not manage to run away. LLENN was confident in her ability to run away, but she could be attacked by an enemy that was also fast on their feet.

Even if a *character* dies, they would only suffer a ≪*death penalty*≫, in other words lose some of the experience points earned, and be returned to town. However, in rare rases, it was possible to lose one's guns or

equipment on the spot via a *random drop*.

If that happened and one's allies did not pick them up, they would be lost for eternity. LLENN wouldn't have any allies, so it's obvious what would happen. If she lost her precious *main arm* P90 when she should be restraining herself for tomorrow's important tournament, she would have no excuse for Pitohui and M.

In the end, she decided not to do anything this afternoon.

Either way, when tomorrow comes, she would cut loose whether she wanted to or not. LLENN,

"Ah, Kanzaki Elza sure is great……"

Spent her time leisurely engulfed in the clear voice of the singer, whose live performance she couldn't go to the next day.

Kanzaki Elza was a *singer* and *songwriter*, so she prepared both song lyrics and composition, but she had *arranged* countless famous *classical* music pieces in her songs. This was one of the reasons why the *classical* music loving Karen liked her songs.

While listening, Karen thought. 'Why doesn't Kanzaki Elza go to a bigger place for her *live* performances?'

Karen suddenly had an idea,

『Dear Kanzaki Elza-sama』

And decided to attempt to write a handwritten *fan letter* to her. Her niece had dropped by and left a cute sheet of writing paper and an envelope.

It was the first time in her life writing something like a *fan letter*, but

strangely, her brush moved of its own free will——

When she realised it, she had written about always having a *complex* about her tall figure, and about being completely absorbed in a VR *game* where she obtained a chibi *avatar* to reduce it.

She continued with 'In the real world, I love your singing voice, so I would like to hear it in person for once. So, if you please, hold your *concerts* in a more spacious location.

After finishing writing it, she went to have dinner, then read it over——

Karen thought that she had really expressed her emotions too much, and it was too embarrassing, but

"……"

Thinking that 'she's probably not going to read it anyways', she decided to send it out as it was.

The forwarding address was Kanzaki Elza's office.

Thinking that it would be nice if in the highly unlikely case she got an answer'——

On the back of the envelope, she wrote her own name and address.

While LLENN was sealing her *fan letter* to Kanzaki Elza with a cute *seal*——

In various places around Japan, there were men, and women, who were preparing for the tournament the next day.

At one place, five men met via an *Internet* telephone.

『At last, the time for us to shine has come! That's tomorrow!』

『Yeah! Let's fight and fall without restraint!』

『Right! Although we were born at different times, we'll die together!』

『No way, you guys die first. I won't pick up your bones, but I will pick up your equipment.』

『You're horrible!』

『Pfthaha! Sorry to burst your bubble, but like the BoB, SJ won't have any *drops*』

『What. Dang.』

『Like you didn't know! You really are horrible!』

『Is that your *joke* to warm up the crowd?』

『Do you want to be shot in the back some day?』

『Now, let's take it easy with the tone! At long last, this strange tournament will be opened. The time when even we, who got defeated in consecutive preliminaries of the third BoB, can be in the spotlight has come!』

『Yeah! If it's a *team* battle, we might reach quite a nice rank!』

『All right! Let's do our best! Let's survive 15 minutes!』

『Yeah!』『Yeah!』『Yeah!』『Yah!』

At another place, one man was talking as he faced six other men.

"At last, it will be tomorrow, but well, this tournament is just an experiment, so even if it doesn't go well, there's nothing to fret about. With you regular gentlemen, we will probably get a considerably high rank. But, if we're about to win, we'll surrender and leave the game as planned. That's all, expect a hard struggle."

In yet another place, there were several women talking on an *Internet* phone at the same time.

『At last, it's tomorrow huh. Don't forget to *log in*. Especially——』

『I know I know! I'll get a call from *Boss* tomorrow!』

『You're always late, aren't you. But, at last, we'll be able to let loose to our heart's content!』

『Now that we've come so far, we have only one goal! Victory! To *get* the prize! Anything other than that won't happen, right?』

『Of course!』

『Roger!』

『Leave it to us! If it's us, we can do it!』

In yet another place, there was a naked man and woman embracing each other on a *bed*, and exchanging words.

"At last, it's tomorrow huh, do your best, *darling*!"

"……"

"Don't worry. Even if you die, you'll just die."

"……"

"If you're feeling so tense, you'll do well no matter what happens!"

"I——"

"Listen! It will be fine! Look, we still have time, so once more!"

"I'm troubled about tomorrow's job……"

"That much won't discourage me. And what about you, have you already become an ojii-san? *Darling*."

Thus, in Japan time, Saturday was over.

As the clock struck midnight, the day of SJ's opening came.

Now, for the beginning of the battle.

Chapter 5 – The Beginning of the Tournament

1st of February, 2026. Sunday.

Beginning around noon, a corner of SBC *Glocken*, the central city in *Gun*

Gale Online, began bustling with activity.

It was a large bar on a broad *main street*.

Although it was called a bar, it also included a *restaurant*, a coffee shop, with a *shopping mall* adjacent to it, alongside having a *game corner*, a *casino* and even an indoor shooting range.

Even on a regular Sunday, this establishment would be reasonably crowded with *players* who liked it, but it was more crowded than usual today.

There was just one reason for this. It was because this venue became the base for the „first *Squad Jam*“.

It differed from a major tournament that raised the profile of GGO like the BoB, and thus this bar, rather than the central institution called the «Governor's Office», was used for the tournament.

The participants temporarily gathered here and, when the time came, would be transported to a small ≪standby *area*≫ for each *team* to prepare.

While there, within the 10 minute *countdown*, team members could take out equipment from their *storage*, and hold a strategy meeting. Then, at exactly 14:00, they would be transported to the battlefield without knowing which terrain they would be on.

The battle *scene* would be broadcasted by a great number of *cameras*.

If it were a tournament on the level of the BoB, the situation would be broadcast via the *net* broadcasting station ≪MMO *Stream*≫, so people connected to the *Internet* could watch anywhere, but the SJ did not go so far.

People could either watch it in this bar while clamorously enjoying themselves via the large *monitors* hanging on the walls and ceiling, watch the broadcast inside GGO, or watch the video recording on another day.

According to the *digital* wristwatch on her left wrist, LLENN, who was dressed in a *robe*, entered the establishment at 12:45.

As the appointed meeting time for *players* participating in SJ was 13:40, the appointment with M was at 13:30, so she had a lot of time to spare.

After LLENN entered the crowded establishment, she looked for a vacant private room. This was to quickly hide herself and not give any information to the opponents she would be facing.

There were quite a few *players* showing off their beloved guns in the bar, but it was all just a foolish act that helped their enemies come up with counter-measures, thus she was warned never to do such a thing by M. Of course, there was also the possibility of someone intentionally showing off a weak gun, then using a powerful *rare* gun in the real battle.

LLENN entered a private room and closed the *curtains*. She then *mailed* the number of the room to M as promised.

Without even having to wait a few minutes and before she finished her first *ice tea*, M turned up. As ever a mountain-like giant, though LLENN no longer feared it.

“Yo. Let’s do our best today.”

“Likewise.”

Excitement within the establishment reached the ears of the pair, who decided to wait leisurely until it was time.

On the screen of the *monitor*, a middle-aged man, the novelist who became the *sponsor* for this tournament, took the role of covering the event as his *RL* self, rather than his *avatar*.

The filthy man with a beard seemed to be rather euphoric as he said things like 'well, this will be fun' or 'everyone, shoot each other in the *game* to your heart's content'.

"So, the guy who brought up the idea for the tournament isn't participating himself!"

One of the audience retorted, and immediately afterwards, someone else,

"Well, although the guy's *RL* identity is exposed, his *avatar* isn't, so ain't he gonna participate sneakily after this coverage is over?"

"That's right! It's the opposite of normal, right!"

"It is an unusual *pattern*……"

"Then, do we get a *bonus* if we kill that guy?"

"I wonder, how much did he spend to organise a tournament of this size?"

Such conversations could be heard.

LLENN and M saw a *list* of participating *teams* on a *window* that floated

in front of their eyes.

In total, twenty three *teams*. Considering that BoB had several hundreds in the preliminaries narrowed down to thirty people, it had to be said that this tournament without preliminaries was really of a small scale.

However, taking into account the fact that each *team* could register up to six people, the maximum number of participants is one hundred and thirty eight, thus it was true that the game taking place in a *field* of the same size as the one used for the BoB would be considerably „packed".

"It would be nice if the bar won't become empty right after the tournament begins."

M said. Having imagined that, LLENN unintentionally chuckled.

However, as one after another *player* intruded on LLENN and M after they entered the private room, that worry was unnecessary. The first *Squad Jam* was unexpectedly thriving.

As for the names of the *teams* on the participation *list*, LLENN and M's was ≪LM≫.

LLENN and M, it was actually just that. LLENN being first was either simply because of the *alphabetical* order, or to show respect to the *leader*.

The other *team* names, like ≪DDL≫, ≪ZEAMAL≫, ≪SYOJI≫, ≪CHBYS≫, ≪DanG≫, ≪SHINC≫ and so on, were all short and *simple* as well.

A lot of them looked like abbreviations, so they probably came up with their name during the registration by abbreviating their own names. Considering this, LLENN thought that LM was fine as a *simple* name.

What's important was that the number of people in a *team* was not written anywhere.

With this, they could only fight under the assumption that every *team* had six people. On the contrary, the fact that LLENN and M were just a two-people party could be used to provoke their opponents' negligence.

It was impossible to have a *sport*[24] gamble about who would win like in the BoB. Instead,

『Let's predict how many bullets will be fired until the conclusion of the tournament is reached! 500 *credits* per guess.』

There were such prediction *games* that weren't present in the BoB, and people were considerably excited.

Since this was a *game* world, the *system* could accurately tell the number of times the participating *characters* had fired. The plan was to guess the number of bullets expended by everyone by the time the conclusion was reached.

In the case of someone guessing correctly up to the last digit—— the person would get the same number of one's desired bullets. However, the upper limit for the bullet size was 7.62 mm.

In GGO, one could buy ammunition themselves (or buy the materials and craft the ammunition), thus if one obtained a large number of bullets, they could play without worrying about the bullet cost for a while after the tournament. Of course, one could also give them to *squadron* comrades or sell them at a store.

In the case where no one guessed correctly, the prize would be given to

[24] Betting which team would win, similarly to how people do so for for sport events.

five people that were the closest to the number, but the prize would be ranked based on whether the guess was accurate to the tens or hundreds.

Even so, it seems that most people used *sub-machine* guns and dozens of hand grenades. It wasn't surprising that it was so lively.

Nonetheless, it wasn't that simple to predict how many bullets would be discharged. The participants were entering random numbers from tens to tens of thousands by hitting the *window* of their competition terminal with the palm of their hands.

Outside this clamour,

"I wonder if Pito-san is in a *dress* right now."

LLENN said, thinking about Pitohui who was currently attending a wedding and,

"Probably. She's most likely grinding her teeth in regret that she couldn't participate in the SJ. Hopefully she won't come up with weird ideas about her surroundings, like „Why is it that my friend the bride looks so depressed? Could it be?""

M replied indifferently, causing LLENN to burst into laughter.

After laughing, LLENN brought her knees together and straightened her back,

"M-san, I look forward to working with you today. For a long time, I was troubled about whether or not I should participate, but I think I'll try playing GGO seriously for a bit more.

And conveyed these polite words to him.

"Gotcha. But, enough with the keigo."

"Ah――― roger."

M, with his rough face and body, said in a gentle tone.

"I was told by that Pitohui. „Make sure you win this""

"Ah, that sounds like Pito-san."

"My answer was 'We'll do as much as we can. But at any rate, we're just two people. In the first place, we'll be at a disadvantage right from the start.' I also said 'If LLENN is killed in action and there are a lot of opponents, we may have to surrender.' 'Well, it can't be helped', was how Pito replied."

"Yeah. That's fine isn't it? I did say that we should seriously do our best a moment ago, but a *game* is a *game*. Besides, in a real war, if we were no match for our opponents, it would be fine to surrender. I think that if I become the only one standing in our team, I'd end up surrendering quickly."

"Nevertheless, we should aim for the top as much as we can. It would be fun to find out how far can just one person go."

At M's words that seemed like he was instructing himself,

"Roger!"

Just as LLENN cheerfully answered, an *announcement* by a girl began to be streamed in the bar.

『Participating players of the *Squad Jam*! Thank you for waiting! In one

minute, the transfer to the standby *area* will begin. Are all your comrades pre-sent?』

The place that LLENN and M were transferred to at 13:50 was a dim and small room.

In front of their eyes was a *countdown watch* 『Waiting time: 09:59』. Decreasing in intervals of 1 second. When it reaches 00:00, they will be transferred to some place in an unknown *field* and the battle will begin.

"All right!"

LLENN said, as her excitement grew.

Whether she liked it or not, she could no longer escape from the match. Shouldn't she go wild without restraint to vent her anger from *RL*?

For that, she needed to make preparations.

Firstly, in front of her eyes, a screen, denoting that the *satellite scan* terminal had been distributed, appeared.

LLENN touch the screen with her hand and a terminal that was like a largish *smartphone* appeared in front of her eyes.

The instructions for how to use it were also displayed. By pressing the two *main buttons*, a large map would appear either from the screen in one's hand, or in front of one's eyes. When one wants to see it stealthily - via the screen; when one had time to spare and wanted to see it with their comrades - in front of their eyes; it seemed that those were the possible choices. The scale of the map could be changed by pinching and spreading one's fingers, just like with a *smartphone*.

The map of the real stage was still unknown, so right now a large „*sample*" was displayed.

During the *satellite scan* once every 10 minutes, white light dots would be displayed. It would be the location of the participating *team*'s *leader*. The dull grey dots would be the last position of a *team* that was wiped out or surrendered. The way to use it was very *simple*. It seemed that she would not have problems with it.

Placing the terminal at her feet for the time being, LLENN changed to her *pink* combat uniform under her *robe*. On her head she of course wore a *pink knit cap*. On the nape of her neck - a *pink bandana*. As for the unnecessary *robe*, she put it in her *storage*.

Next up was her equipment. Her beloved gun P-chan, a P90 dyed in *pink*, appeared in her hands. On the sides of her thighs, a *pouch* with three spare *magazines* each.

LLENN liked liked the fact that her clothes changing instantly with just the operation of the *window* screen was like the transformation *scene* of a magical girl anime that she saw in the past.

She believed that pretty much no one would be using optical guns in a battle against people like SJ, but there were eccentrics everywhere. For peace of mind, LLENN also equipped a large *brooch*-like *item*, a defence *field* generating device.

There was room to spare on her waist *belt*, so she equipped a cylindrical first-aid *kit pouch* on the side of her *magazine pouch*. A first aid *kit* was a recovery *item* that, if tapped on the skin, would restore 30 *percent* of one's lost *hit points*. However, it would actually take 180 seconds for it to finish, so it was awfully useless in the midst of a battle.

The *satellite scan* terminal placed at her feet completely fit in the large

chest *pocket* of her combat uniform.

"All right."

With this, LLENN's preparations were complete.

And then,

"Take this."

M, who had materialised his M14 EBR and placed it at his feet, presented something to LLENN.

"Hm?"

While tilting her head to the side, she accepted it; a *combat knife* in a scabbard.

The green scabbard was made of *plastic* with a black *cover* made of *nylon*, while a knife with a black *grip* was sheathed in it. Its overall length was approximately 30 *cm*. The length of its blade alone was probably a little less than 20 *cm*.

LLENN timidly unfastened the *flap*, drew the *knife* from the scabbard and a very very evil-looking, matte black blade that did not reflect light appeared.

Although she used a kitchen knife for cooking, it was her first time holding such a large *knife*. Coupled with the smallness of LLENN's hands, it looked as if she was holding a nata knife[25].

Although it was the same blade as a kitchen knife, it was a more

[25] A wide blade knife (similar to a machete, but not so large).

immediate „weapon“ than a gun, so it made LLENN feel considerably scared,

“……”

She ended up immediately returning it to the scabbard. After fastening the *flap* as well, LLENN faced M.

“M-san, what am I…… supposed to do with this?”

“Your strength value should still allow it, so have it as an additional armament. Otherwise, when you run out of bullets for your P90, you won’t be able to do anything.”

“But, I’ve equipped seven *magazines*, so that’s 350 bullets, you know?”

LLENN objected.

Three in each *pouch* on her thighs and one equipped on the P90. That was a considerably large number of bullets that could be carried by one person. That was the result of the P90’s large quantity of bullets per *magazine*.

Because of that unique *layout*, changing the *magazine* for the P90 takes quite some time compared to other guns, but considering LLENN’s tempered agility and dexterity, she could easily and quickly handle it even while flying in mid-air.

Additionally, she had another three in her *storage*, so she could equip new *magazines* in-between battles.

LLENN had never had trouble with running out of bullets for her P90 so far. For that reason, she did not equip a side arm.

However, M did not yield.

“Although GGO is about gunfights, in considerably close combat in narrow rooms, it is possible to encounter hand-to-hand combat occasionally. All the more so in SJ as there are a lot of people. It is possible that I’ll give you the instruction „use a *knife* that doesn’t make any sound“”

Even LLENN could not deny that.

Even during *monster* farming, there were plenty of cases of her coming too close to her opponent and unleashing her bullets at point blank range. If she had a *knife* in those cases, she could indeed use slash and stab attacks. Moreover, it wouldn't make a sound.

“In close-quarter combat, *knives* are often stronger than guns. More so when a person’s agility is as high as yours, LLENN. Equip it horizontally on the back of your waist. When you need to use it, draw it with your right hand in a backhand grip——”

While saying this, M moved his own right hand and *lectured* her.

“Your opponents should be bigger than you LLENN——”

Well, there wasn’t any chance of her opponent being smaller than her.

“If you are confronting them directly, assault them, pass under the enemy’s groin, and cut at either the left or right inner thigh. A femoral artery runs there, so it will cause considerable *damage*. Sometimes, greater than when hit with a bullet.”

“……”

It was an unpleasant *lecture* which was far too *realistic*.

GGO's *damage* setting reproduces human vitals quite well.

If the centre of the head or the medulla oblongata is shot, even if the bullet is small, an instant death with one bullet was possible. Even if that didn't happen, spots that could cause great bleeding and spots that could lead to the person being unable to move one's body if injured lead to far greater decrease of one's *hit points* when hit.

LLENN thought, 'With a gun, there wouldn't be that much resistance, but with a *knife*, you'd really want to avoid using it'. But she felt a bit relieved that no matter how long someone was engulfed in playing GGO or how many times one shot someone, they definitely wouldn't be able to commit murder in *RL*.

But then, aside from magic attacks, ALO, the game that LLENN first tried playing with Miyu, was a meatgrinder[26] *game* where everyone would cut each other with swords.

M's „murder technique" *lecture* continued.

"Additionally, if your opponent comes pointing his gun at you, cut at the interior of his upper arm from below with an *uppercut*. That also leads to a lot of *damage*, and the person may drop his gun because of pain and numbness."

In VR *games*, when someone gets hit, cut, struck with magic, shot and, on top of that, bitten by a *monster*— „receive *damage*" in any way, they would feel pain.

How much pain—— or rather, a „feeling that *simulates* pain", that a

[26] The original text uses the word 肉弾戦 (nikudansen), which means "warfare in which enemies fling themselves at the enemy". The closest expression I could come up with was "meatgrinder", in the meaning of "a slaughterhouse for soldiers".

player felt depended on the *game*, but in GGO, the pain was considerable.

It is said that the feeling of being shot was close to the feeling of „an acupressure point being pressed".

In shiatsu[27] and other therapies, when a painful acupressure point is pressed, the surrounding area becomes numb with a throb and the energy in the vicinity is released; it was a feeling like that. When shiatsu is over, the pain is immediately allieved, and no injuries remain on the skin, so it was quite similar.

The hands and arms were especially sensitive to the pain of being shot, so dropping whatever was in one's hands in such a situation was quite common.

"Even if the opponent drops their gun, there's no need to pick it up. Follow up by aiming and slicing the interior part of the thighs or the hands. Humans who came to fight with just their guns won't be expecting hand-to-hand combat."

M's *lecture* still continued. The fact that he was saying all of that indifferently was considerably scary.

"If an opponent that you hadn't noticed comes attacking from behind, aim to strike the Achilles tendon slightly above the *boots* on the side while lowering your back. Then, even if the opponent is downed, there will be a protective *plate* on their abdomen and chest, so your blade won't go through much. In that case, the first thing you should aim for is the neck. Make a cut as long as you can along the nape of the neck. It should be like brushing the neck in a semicircle."

"……Yeah……"

[27] Shiatsu (指圧, lit. "finger pressure") is the name of a finger pressure massage/therapy in Japanese.

While giving a half-hearted reply, LLENN

'M-san, what kind of person are you!'

Had such an idea in her mind.

He was excessively knowledgable. Nothing but eagerly desiring in-*game* knowledge.

"If aiming for the head, go for the eyes. Human bones are surprisingly sturdy, so even if you thrust violently at them, the blade won't go through easily. The exception is the eye socket. If an eye is stabbed, the *damage* even reaches the brain. In GGO, when aiming for an instant death with one blow in a *knife* battle, the neck and this are probably the only viable options."

While shouting 'ugee' in her mind, LLENN listened to what her lecturer said and put it all in her head. She was serious at heart, thus her common sense lost out at times like this. She gained a lot of knowledge that an ordinary female university student could do without.

"That's all."

In the end, LLENN could not get M to take back the *knife*, so she reluctantly equipped it at the back of her waist. As she was in-*game*, through operating the *window* screen, she equipped a beautiful *belt*.

LLENN held her P90 on her left shoulder via the gun's *sling* and extended her right hand towards the *knife*.

With her thumb, the well-made *strap* was unfastened without a sound, and the *knife* was drawn out smoothly. While holding it in a backhand grip, she tried lightly swinging it in front of her. She hadn't felt such heaviness.

LLENN was a *character* with high agility, so if brandished it while making serious effort, she would probably be able to slash considerably quickly.

"All right."

M said a short phrase in approval——

While returning the *knife* to its scabbard, LLENN thought that she definitely wouldn't need to use it.

When the remaining time was less the 3 minutes, M's exciting dress-up was completed.

Just like the other day, gaudy green camouflage from top to bottom. He had a *bush hat* on his head, but this time there were multiple layers of rectangle-shaped camouflage cloth hanging down from it. It was a disguise for obscuring the most conspicuous *silhouette* that was his head.

On the upper half of his body, there was a *vest* with a massive bulletproof *plate* and with plenty of *magazine pouches* attached. This time, *plasma grenades* were hanging down from his side, or more like they were mostly hanging down from his back.

As for these *plasma grenades*, compared to usual grenades that scattered fragments upon the explosion of gunpowder, they were far more powerful.

Once it exploded, a torrent of bluish-white energy would spread in a spherical area of approximately 4 *metres* in diameter, and everything in it, aside from objects of massive weight, would be blown away.

If there's a human within the effective range, it depended on their defensive power, should their bodies suffered sixty-eighty percent of the damage or more - instant death. If it was less than that, a great deal of *damage* depending on the amount.

They were lightweight and cheap in contrast to their power, so it was a popular offensive *item* in the world of GGO. There were also cases of people throwing these at each other with all they have at close range with cover in-between, like an extreme snowball fight.

On M's back, a greatly swelled out *backpack* that LLENN still did not know the contents of.

On his right thigh, a *holster* with his HK45. On his left thigh, a *pouch* with M14 EBR and HK45 *magazines*.

The giant who had *fully* equipped and was holding his large gun, the M14 EBR, was like a *robot* from SF movies.

'It seems it would be fun if he'd let me ride on his shoulders.'

LLENN thought, but left it unsaid.

The digit denoting the minutes of remaining waiting time had already reached zero.

Only the digits representing seconds, 43, 42, 41, 40, 39—— relentlessly continued to decrease.

"All right…… Let's do this, shall we."

M's composed voice reached her both directly, and through the communication *item* in her left ear. Hereafter, the *switch* would not be

turned off until the *game* ended.

"Roger!"

LLENN pulled and released the loading *handle*, and with a dry metallic sound, a bullet was loaded in the gun chamber.

M also pulled the loading *handle* of his M14 EBR, and a thick metallic sound resounded farther than the P90's.

This sound of loading the chamber was not a sound that would rouse LLENN's will to fight.

Along with the feeling of excitement, the *countdown* continued——,

The moment all digits displayed zero, the two were engulfed in light.

LLENN's *whited out* field of vision regained its colour and form.

Where are we?

The first thing that should be confirmed was the kind of terrain she was on.

Just as LLENN visually confirmed her whereabouts,

"It's a forest. Not good, huh."

M's voice could be heard at the same time.

"It's a forest……"

The location of LLENN, who muttered that regretfully, was a woodland zone.

They were in a forest with many tall trees growing right in front of them. It was not a thick and luxuriant forest, but made her recall the forests on the continent of North America she had seen on *TV*.

The probably 3 *metre*-thick trunks overlapped one another, so the field of vision was poor, and she could not see beyond 100 *metres*. As for the ground, a species of knee-length fern grew on the moist soil, and looking in the other direction, she noticed that there was a bit of an incline.

Looking up, LLENN noticed that the branches of the many trees had formed a dark roof, and the always red sky could only be seen faintly seen through the gaps.

LLENN immediately understood the reason why M said „not good".

"There are two problems right? M-san. The first, is that we can't make the best use of M-san's sniping. The other is that I stand out."

With so many trees lined up, the range for battling against enemies would be dozens of *metres* at the longest. It was an advantageous distance for LLENN's P90, but a bad distance for M's *support*.

Even for LLENN, to have her *pink* camouflage display its effect, she needed a desert or wilderness illuminated by the always red sun. This place that was just dim was very disadvantageous.

M with his green camouflage, on the other hand, ominously blended in. If he stood still, it seemed he was one with the forest.

"That's right. This place is disadvantageous."

While responding, M turned his left hand towards his back, and put it inside the *side pocket* of his *backpack*. Just when LLENN wondered what could he be taking out, what appeared between them was a large *poncho*. With gaudy camouflage patterns that were the same as M's.

M grasped it with his left hand, *basa*, threw it to LLENN.

"Until we come out of the forest, put this on. When it's important to do so, you may drop it. I don't mind if you end up shooting through the *poncho* with the P90."

'I see, this will definitely be less conspicuous than *pink*.' LLENN though after confirming one of M's „secret tools". In this situation, he seemed to be carrying camouflage *poncho*s matched for various terrain.

LLENN put on the *poncho* beginning from her head.

It hid her hands and weapon, but it was fine to shoot through this *poncho* if they encountered an enemy. If this was a battle in *RL*, such a thing would probably be quite difficult, but, in GGO, there was the *Bullet Circle* feature that showed the trajectory of the bullets.

Even if one could not peek through the sights of their gun, just by placing one's finger on the trigger, a *circle* would appear so there was no need for a proper stance at close range. Of course, in the case of precise shooting, if one did not assume a proper stance, the gun would move chaotically, and the *circle* would similarly move chaotically.

„In the case of a close range gunfight, it's fine to aim the *circle* at the enemy quickly without taking up a proper stance" as a shooting *technique* in GGO was LLENN's forte in battle.

At the same time, it was one of the reasons why the *dot sight* (a sight

attached with a red dot that showed the bullet trajectory on a *lens* that did not magnify) and the *laser sight* (using an emitted *laser* to aim) were completely unpopular. The *dots* and *laser* would overlap with the *circle*, conversely making it hard to aim.

"After we see the map, let's move."

Were M's words. This location was disadvantageous, so his strategy was probably to quickly move out.

"Gotcha! Where to?"

LLENN, who was like a green monster, with the overly long *poncho* covering her entire body, asked. M operated the *satellite scan* terminal and a map image appeared at the space in front of the two. For both of them to view it at the same time, this way was more convenient.

What appeared in the image was a map with north as the top cardinal direction.

It was *coloured*, and the terrain was reproduced as a three-dimensional image; so it was really easy to understand. Naturally, just like with a *smartphone* or *tablet*, they could freely change the scale and angle.

For the first time, LLENN checked out the stage, the geography of where she would be fighting hereafter.

The battlefield was surrounded by deep gorges running down the left and right ends of the map, in other words, towards the east and west, as well as mountains at the top and cliffs at the bottom.

The gorges in the east and west, as geographical features, marking the boundary of the *field* where movement was possible, were common in other *fields* as well. If someone fell off the cliff which was over 100 *metre-*

high, they would die.

Possibly because *players* retorted that this was far too convenient, an actually plausible setting: „It is a scar made by robust fin-stabilisers from the lower of the hull of a giant spaceship, when it performed an emergency landing“ was established.

On the north side - a mountain that quickly grew steep. On the south side - a cliff that was so high that it seemed like the earth's crust had formed a gap. Of course, no matter how much effort one put it, or what kind of *skills* one used, both of them were *areas* where passage was impossible.

From top to bottom, the width of the zone where movement was possible was around 10 *km*, just like in the BoB. At regular intervals, eleven vertical and horizontal *grid* lines ran through the map, thus the width of one square was 1 *km*.

Roughly grasping the *area* where movement was possible——,

The south side (under 3 *km* in width) was an open *area*, dotted with rocks, wildernesses and deserts. Here and there, rocky mountains, ruins and other places where one could hide themselves could be seen.

The central part of the east side was filled by the ruins of a large city. Large streets and still standing skyscrapers were depicted. „It's facing the gorge on the east side, but the *buildings* are still standing after the spaceship's emergency landing?“, such a question was ignored on this occasion.

The central part of the map seemed to be an old residential district lined with low-class houses. The roads and buildings were finely depicted, and it looked like a maze. A vast extent of blue could be seen, but it was proof that this *area* was submerged.

There was a river flowing in the vicinity from the upper-right to the bottom-left, so this is probably where the water was flowing from. If it was shallow, one could of course walk through it, but if it was deep, the action of „swimming“ would become necessary.

In this case, if one did not temporarily put their heavy equipment, like guns, into *storage*, one would sink unless swimming was their forte. Also, underwater, one's *hit points* would gradually decrease, thus it wasn't really a place that one would want to go through.

The northeast was filled by a green woodland area, and a *marker* denoting their own location shone faintly. This was in the SJ *rule book*. It was an assistance measure that, for just a minute after the beginning, would allow players to know their own position. After that minute, they would have to wait until the *satellite scan*.

Based on their observation, LLENN and M seemed to be positioned nearly at the upper-rightmost corner of the map. There was a *rule* that each team would be at least 1 *km* away from others at the start of the *game*, thus no enemy would be more to the north and east than them.

On the west side of the forest, in other words, the north-west area - a gently-sloping prairie. It was an *area* with unobstructed view and with no where to hide.

The west side below it was a circle-shaped wetland with poor footholds. There, a large spaceship-like giant structure had pierced the ground in an almost perpendicular manner. Like the *buildings*, it should be possible to enter and climb it. The swamp had likely formed after this spaceship crashed.

LLENN, who had been looking at the map for around 10 seconds, looked up, while M continued glaring at the map for another 15 seconds.

He was standing without quivering and, moreover, with a serious expression she had never seen before, so LLENN kept quiet and waited. Well, it's not like she knew him that well.

"All right."

M pressed the *button* of the *satellite scan* terminal, the map disappeared, and M whispered the following order,

"In any case, we're leaving the disadvantageous forest. We'll probably won't make it there until the first *scan*, but I want to use the city as much as possible. We're heading due south. Follow me at a 10 *metre* interval."

His natural voice was barely audible, but due to the communication *item* that automatically adjusted the volume, she could hear it very *clearly*. With this, even if they weren't able to hear each other at all if an enemy was right next to them, there was no need for *hand signs*, in other words, gestures, to understand each other

"Roger. I'll follow."

After LLENN answered, M immediately began running towards the centre of the forest. There was no hesitation in his actions at all. Facing the urban area in the south, he descended down the slope.

There shouldn't be any enemies close by yet, but M did not show any negligence, and was carrying his EBR in front of his body so that he could immediately shoot if he happened to see anyone and continued running while examining the surroundings.

With her body covered by a camouflaging *poncho*, once M was the aforementioned 10 *metres* away, LLENN began following him. Not getting too close was to avoid the 1 in 10,000 chance of being wiped out by a *full auto* rapid fire or *grenade* explosions in case enemies ambushed

them.

LLENN continued running, while instructing herself „a bit more slowly“, as she had high agility and would outrun him if she ran too fast.

Just as they had travelled towards the dark centre of the forest for around 200 *metres* by eye-measurement,

Abruptly, they heard a sound like the beating of a small drum from afar.

“Stop. Crouch.”

With these sharp words, M stopped moving, and quickly crouched. At times like this, his reaction was truly fast. LLENN followed suit, and though a bit confused, bent down 10 *metres* behind him.

Tatatatan, such a light sound of gunfire repeatedly overlapped, creating a disordered *rhythm*. It was like some unskilled person was randomly and repeatedly hitting a small drum. Unmistakably, a *team* was exchanging gunfire with another *team* somewhere.

The long, followed by short, sounds continued without a break for 2 seconds or more. It seemed that a considerable number of bullets were disseminated.

“A 5.56 *mm-class assault rifle*, huh. There’s a guy firing with a *submachine* gun too.”

M’s calm analysis reached LLENN’s ears.

“You can tell? M-san.”

“Yeah.”

In GGO, sounds from real guns were recorded where possible, so the level of reproduction was high.

Be that as it may, she did not know if guessing even the type of gun used was a *character* skill, or *player* knowledge.

"Hah? Haah……"

LLENN was amazed by how good M's ears were. Following that, the next question came to her mind.

"They're already fighting? Isn't it too early?"

"They probably wanted an advantageous *position*, *dashed* recklessly with all they had, and met someone due to bad luck. The location is somewhere further to the west. It isn't really early."

"I see……"

Just as M said, there were still 7 minutes until the first *satellite* scan, so it probably really was a chance meeting.

Considering the guys in question, they were awfully unlucky. That before they could obtain the advantageous *position* they desired, they ended up in a gaudy melee fight. There will probably be *characters* who would end up in a *game over* death 3 minutes after SJ started

While the loud sounds continued,

"Move slowly beyond this point, LLENN, you stand first. This way. I'll indicate if you deviate from it."

M slowly moved his left hand and indicated the direction in which she

should proceed.

"If in the 1 in 10,000 chance we encounter an enemy inside the forest, firstly, crouch on the spot. After that, I'll instruct you according to the situation."

"R-roger……"

To be honest, in the current situation, when she did not know when she would encounter enemies, and moreover, with an obstructed view, taking the role of the vanguard was quite scary, but if she was ordered to do so by a *player* who likely excelled over her, she had no other choice.

While being careful to advance as straightly as possible, avoiding thick trunks and keeping a close watch on the point that she was advancing towards, LLENN advanced at the speed of a fast walk.

She advanced and advanced, but inside the forest, it was as if the scenery did not change. This was a location where one would even be uncertain whether they were really moving.

'Just don't suddenly encounter enemies, just don't encounter them——'

While wishing for that in her mind, she resisted the desire to put her left hand's index finger on the P90's trigger. Moving while having one's finger on the trigger risked accidental discharge when the person fell, so she absolutely had to refrain from doing that.

Soon, the gunfire that they could hear in the distance suddenly disappeared. She did not know whether one of the *teams* won, or both ran away.

'Just don't let there be enemies just don't let there be enemies just don't let there be enemies just don't let there be enemies don't be there don't

be there——'

With her fear putting her on edge, LLENN descended the slope of the forest. 'There could be someone hiding on the other side of that trunk. We could be shot from the side when we pass through it.'

There would be no end to such thoughts, so, eventually,

'„Oh enough! If you do come, then come at me! Even if we stab at each other, I'll turn you into P-chan's rust!"'

She marched on while having such a thought in mind.

However, it seemed that the goddess of good luck smiled on LLENN. Even 9 minutes after the *game* started, they did not come into contact with any enemy.

"All right, stop. Crouch. Vigilant standby."

In order to *check* on the *satellite scan*, she got an instruction to stop marching from M.

"Whew……"

LLENN crouched on the spot in the forest.

Even if he had said that a bit later, LLENN planned to stop her march without being ordered to.

This was because, the forest would end in about 10 *metres* in front of her. From that point on, below the slope covered in just grass, was a city that was turned to ruins.

A large street, perhaps a highway, with six or so traffic lanes, stretched

out in front of LLENN's eyes. It wasn't an overhead structure, it was at the same height as the surrounding ground. Thinking about its position, the river was probably flowing through a culvert below the highway.

It was a paved road that looked easy to move through. In several places, some cars had toppled over, and some were scorched. Compared to the forest they were currently in, the field of vision was overwhelmingly open, but at the same time, the amount of cover, in other words, places where one could hide, had diminished.

At that point, there were a lot of small mountains of rubble, and also, a great number of towering ruined *buildings* of ten to thirty floors.

LLENN carefully examined what she saw ahead. Within her current range of vision, there were no human figures. The city should extend to the south for 1 *km* or more for certain, so the enemies that could be positioned in the south side would be coming from the south or west.

"Whew……"

LLENN exhaled deeply, 'now then, where is M', as she tried turning around,

"I'm 300 *metres* behind you."

M's voice reached her ears.

"Wha? That far?"

M's calm response reached LLENN, who unintentionally said that in surprise.

"A *scan* will be made soon. LLENN's position, will be exposed. So I'm keeping my distance."

"……"

"If we're unlucky and there's an enemy in the vicinity, they'll certainly rush to LLENN's position right after the *scan*."

LLENN understood that too. But in that case, she would have to take on a maximum of six people by herself. She had no hope of winning.

"A-and then……? If that happens, what, should I do?"

LLENN questioned, as she completely did not understand what M was thinking, and had no choice but to ask.

"In that case, you don't have to aim, so walk along the trees and retreat while shooting away in a flashy manner. I'll snipe the people chasing you as I go around the left side."

'I see, in short I'll be a decoy, while M goes around the east side which should not have enemies as it's the *field* boundary', LLENN now understood .

She understood but——

'Turning the *leader* into a decoy is such an awful plan!'

She was a bit angry.

When the clock hit 14:09:30, the wrist watch on LLENN's left arm began to vibrate bit by bit . An *alarm* was set to ring 30 seconds before each *satellite scan*.

"LLENN, you don't need to look at the *scan* terminal, keep an eye on your surroundings."

"Roger."

He did not have to tell her that enemies might be rushing towards her, so she could not leisurely look at the terminal. Under her camouflage *poncho*, LLENN checked whether she had disengaged the safety for the P90 with her finger once more.

And at the next moment,

"Huh?"

She observed moving figures.

Chapter 6 – The Beginning of the Battle

"Wha?"

What LLENN discovered were obviously humans.

From the outskirts of the forest she was currently in, she saw an urban area astride a wide highway—— and on that large road, she saw men walking in a line, hiding behind the pile of rubble. They were far away and thus small, so she could not see them well, but there were large, black rods in their hands. It probably wasn't possible that those were not guns.

LLENN hid at the side of a large tree nearby, with only her right eye peeking out.

"Er, M-san…… Enemy detected……"

"There's 30 seconds until the *scan*. Explain as best as you can."

"Huh? E-err, on the other side of a highway! Inside the city! Probably 200 *metres* or more away! Err, err——"

"Calm down. How many do you see? What about the guns?"

"At least five of them! Don't know about the guns! But, they're not small! They're on the other side of some rubble, ah, all of them stopped now!"

"They plan to look at the *scan*. They'll notice you."

"W-www-what should I do? Shoot them? Ff-fire at them?"

With her voice full of impatience, LLENN repeated.

"First, calm down. You can't take them on with your P90 at that range. At any rate, you'll be discovered. The *scan* is starting now. Wait there."

"Hyaa."

While giving a small shriek, LLENN looked at the watch on her left wrist. For certain, 14:10.

"Even though I discovered them fi-irst!"

LLENN unintentionally blurted. What bad luck.

The *scan* should have begun, but LLENN, who wasn't operating a terminal, could not see it. 10 seconds that felt like forever passed,

"Confirmed. There's a team at the boundary of the urban area and highway. The distance is a little over 200 *metres*."

M's overly calm voice reached her ears.

"A-anyone else?"

At LLENN's question,

"It's fine. At the moment, there isn't anyone within range who can come here to fight immediately."

M answered. *Whew*, the moment that she sighed in relief following the great *news*, translucent red lines soundlessly extended towards the forest she was in.

It looked like a *laser* beam meant for alignment, but this was actually a *Bullet Line*.

It was a „In a moment, bullets will come flying here" kind of considerate notice in GGO. They numbered over a hundred.

They can be clearly seen even at night, or if it was raining, or if the player was in a fog. The scene of the red lines piercing the forest and jumping was like a flashy *concert* venue.

"Hyaa! M-san! I'm being targeted!"

While shrieking, LLENN drew her head back and at the same moment, *byun!* a sound similar to the lashing of a whip hit the tree she had hid behind. In various places, the sound of trees being shot joined in.

Late by *one tempo*, a heavy and low *dododododododo* and a light *tatatatatatatatatan* *rhythm* that was far louder than before resounded.

Even though they did not see LLENN's body, the location she was hiding in had been exposed by the *scan*. Naturally, the bullets would gather there, and thus the surrounding 30 *metres* or so were assaulted by a hail of bullets like a *guerrilla* rainstorm[28].

The soil flew up from the ground, while the leaves of the fern fluttered about. Occasionally, an *orange*, bright line, differing from the *Bullet Lines*, ran horizontally. It was the light of a tracer[29] that shined to make it easier for the shooter to grasp the trajectory of their bullets.

Her vision perceived - red lines and the ground and tree trunks popping like *popcorn*. Her hearing perceived - a *chun* sound of bullets flying, a *bishibashi* sound of trees being pierced and the sound of gunfire completely *mixed* together.

"Hyaa! M-SA-AN! I'm under heavy fire! It's scary! HE-ELP!"

What came to LLENN's left ear after she called for help without moving from her current position was,

"Yeah. The opponent is using a *machine gun* huh."

A voice of calm analysis.

"Whaaa?"

[28] According to wikipedia, "guerrilla rainstorm" (ゲリラ豪雨) is an expression which is used by Japanese media to describe short localized downpours of over 100 mm of rain per hour since 2006.
[29] Tracers are bullets that leave a visible trail of their trajectory, allowing the shooter to make aiming corrections.

"A 7.62 *mm class* general-purpose machine gun. Judging from the sound of rapid fire, it's probably an ≪FN MAG≫. Two or more of them. There's also a high-speed rapid-fire sound, lightly resounding, so a 5.56 *mm* is also mixed in. A ≪Minimi≫ from the same FN *Herstal* company?"

"Hey! Aren't you going to help me?"

"Since you're fine right now, it's safe for you to hide there. Keep still."

"Let's get'em!"

In front the rubble in the urban area around 200 *metres* away from LLENN,

"Hyahhaa!"

Were men pounding away with their *machine guns* with eloquent smiles.

Five in total.

All of them had quite rough-bodied *avatars*, though not to the extent of M.

And, the small arms in their hands were all rough as well.

"This is fuuuuuuuun!"

The man shouting this was pounding away with one of the most famous *machine guns* in the world, the FN MAG, in *full auto*.

With his bipod mounted on the pile of rubble, his target was, of course, the forest across the highway/

A heavy and low *dododododododododododododododo* sound resounded, pulling in dust from the surroundings with the shockwave

of its muzzle. The 7.62 *mm* bullets in the ammunition *belt* extending from the left side of the gun were sucked up at a speed of 10 bullets or more per second and discharged forward, while the empty shells were ejected from the metal *links* attached to the *belt* and dispersed to the gun's right side.

The muzzle kept spewing out red, red flame, and the tracers inserted at intervals of 1 every 5 bullets kept drawing *orange* lines. Several *metres* to the side was,

"Doryaaaaaaaaaaa!"

Heatedly shouting, a man who was holding a ≪M240B≫, a model of the FN MAG adopted by the United States Armed Forces—— which was the same gun except for its appearance—— by its *carrying handle* in his left hand, with the gun's *stock* under his arms, attacked in rapid-fire while standing.

The remaining three men also used *machine guns*.

One with a 7.62 *mm* ≪M60E3≫ *machine gun*.

One with a 5.56 *mm* light machine gun, the *Minimi*.

And the last one with a ≪*Negev*≫, which was inspired by the *Minimi* and made by the *Israel Military Industries*, lying atop a pile of rubble while shooting.

The battle *scene* was being broadcast, so light blue circles, indicating the position of *cameras* in the air, were moving around them, looking for a cool *angle*.

The team that was currently broadcast, and raised excitement in the bar were the five men who,

『Let's survive at least 15 minutes!』[30]

Made such a rather pitiable vow the previous night.

On the list, they were named ≪ZEMAL≫. Neither LLENN, M, nor any other *player* was aware that this was the abbreviation of ≪Zen-nihon[31] *Machine Gun Lovers*≫.

They were men who could not stop loving machine guns.

They were *players* scattered throughout Japan who had met each other by chance and hit off well in-*game*. As for why the merely five-man *team* called themselves All-Japan, they included residents from Hokkaido and Okinawa, and that was the entire reason for the name.

„Loving *machine guns* too much is cool" was their common preference.

This was why the guns they used absolutely had to be *machine guns*.

They did not use anything else, and if they did, they would be excommunicated. They did not even have a pistol *side arm*. As for optical guns and the like, they were a company of guys who thought „What is that, is it tasty?".

A considerably high strength value was needed to handle heavy guns, so what they mainly raised went without saying. *Machine guns* were expensive guns, thus one had to put in steady labour or, depending on the person, invest *real money* to obtain them; that's how passionate they had to be.

And, although they enjoyed GGO together, they had one characteristic.

The characteristic of „being excessively weak in battles against other people".

[30] The same line in SECT.4 did not have "at least" (最低), in case anyone decides to compare them.
[31] Japanese for "All-Japan"

A *machine gun* was a powerful weapon that was capable of unleashing a large hail of bullets. Basically, it used ammunition attached to a *belt*, and thus it was capable of continuously firing 100 bullets or more without break.

If they used their guns to keep firing bullets around the area where the enemy was located and suppress them, then used an *assault rifle* or *submachine gun* to shoot them in the backs in the meantime, they would have had a considerable advantage in battle, but…

"Uooooo!" "This feeels goooooood!" "Hyahaaaaa!" "Doryaa!" "Di~e!"

Currently, all five of them, who were pounding away as they pleased, did not even know the „c" from cooperation[32].

That was because they believed that it was enough to shoot with their *machine guns* with all their strength. If they could feel the extending sound and vibration, it was enough for them.

They did not desire to go through the trouble of studying tactics, collecting information about their opponents and working cooperatively. They even had the defiant view that „Pounding away is our tactic."

That was why, until now, they had not seriously taken part in a battle against people. They had only pounded away at *monster* opponents to earn experience points and *credits*. They had encountered other *teams* on their way to and from farming, but…

"They're all equipped with live-ammunition *machine guns*. They're not coming back from a farming session. Let's pass."

They arbitrarily judged, „Those guys are good at battles against people" about their opponents, and have never even attacked anyone.

[32] "Re" from "renkei" (連携) in the original.

They had also participated in the individual BoB tournament, but even when they were lucky and broke through the first match by bulldozing with sheer firepower, they could not go any further and had never participated in the main tournament.

And then came this SJ.

They *entered* this tournament, where they could pound away with their *machine guns* as a *team*, in high spirits, thinking that this was a tournament made for them, and the *game* started,

"This close on the first *scan*, huh!"

"Yeah, *lucky*!"

"Thank you, god of machine guns!"

And all they had done was pound away.

Setting aside the hidden power of such opponents,

"Hyaa!"

To LLENN, who was being shot at, it did not change the fact that she was in a *pinch*.

The 5 *machine guns* kept incessantly firing bullets at her, so the surrounding area was in an awful condition.

In merely a minute, the trees near LLENN had become riddled with holes. Naturally, some of them were also destroyed.

LLENN ended up imagining 'Even the large tree trunk I'm hiding behind, though I can't see it, could be half gouged out, and in the

meantime, they could be coming to kill me.'

"Uu……"

Shivers went down her spine.

While the rain of iron continued mercilessly,

"M-san M-sa-an!"

LLENN sought help from her only comrade.

The *satellite scan* time should have already ended, so she thought 'Even if he came to save me, no, even if coming here was unreasonable, he could do something,' but…

"Stay where you are. Don't move tactlessly."

The answer from M was very *cool* yet cold.

"Guu……"

LLENN wanted to somehow run away from this bullet hailstorm *area* , but even if she moved, *Bullet Lines* conspicuously shone in the surroundings. She would be shot before she reached the next tree.

"Shiit!"

Swearing in an unfeminine manner, she curled herself up and sat motionlessly.

Speaking of M, at that time——

Behind LLENN, he had moved closer by about 100 *metres*. While using a thick tree as a cover, he cautiously peeked out, and in his field vision, he

saw the *Bullet Lines* of the guns aiming at LLENN from the other side of some forest trees. He understood that the forest was crawling with red lines.

Occasionally, he changed direction to avoid the *Bullet Lines*, and even though some had come close to his position, he had not needed to dodge them yet.

Without care for the bullets that came flying the moment the *Bullet Lines* disappeared, he lurked motionlessly in the shadow of a tree, while placing priority on keeping watch on the west side where enemies could approach them.

M looked at the wrist watch on the inner part of his left arm. 3 minutes had passed since the *scan* at 14:10.

"It should be soon……"

The communication *item* picked up M's mutter,

"What should be soon?"

Expecting an order, a voice came from *LLENN*, but M replied without delay.

"Nothing. Stay where you are."

"Reloading!"

Shouted one of the Zen-nihon *Machine Gun Lovers*, the guy who had been shooting with the M240B while standing, as he crouched. What he took out from the long and narrow *backpack* that he carried on his back was a bag with spare ammunition *belts* and spare gun barrels.

A *machine gun* was a gun that could shoot in rapid-fire, but nevertheless, it wasn't like it could shoot endlessly.

Because of the frequent shots, the barrel would suffer from heating, and its capability would suddenly decrease. For that reason, after shooting for some time, it was absolutely necessary to exchange gun barrels, and this was reproduced even in GGO.

A gun's durability is determined by each of its *parts*, and the first effect to realistically arise after continuing to shoot in rapid-fire was the barrel. If one were to continuing pounding away without minding this, the gun's accuracy would fall below practical levels and, finally, the gun would no longer be able to function.

"Roger!" "Aye!" "Leave it to us." "Gotcha!"

The surrounding comrades answered. They had almost no tactical cooperation, yet as expected of the men who exceedingly loved *machine guns*, only in times like this would they stand firm.

The man pulled the loading *lever* and took down the *belt*, confirming that the *top cover* with no remaining bullets was open.

Next, by pressing the *button* on the left side of the gun, the *carrying handle* that was attached to the belt twisted to the left with a jerk. With just this, the *lock* on the barrel was released and it came off to the front.

The moment it was unfastened, he equipped a new barrel, then equipped a new ammunition *belt* to the gun, and finished his reload in merely a few seconds.

"Aww yeaah! I'm pounding away!"

The man, who once again stood up and pointed his muzzle at the forest where LLENN probably was, with a smile——

Without even firing a single bullet, tumbled down from his spot.

On the back of the neck of the man who had collapsed head-first, at the point where the spinal cord ran, was the trace of a bright red light indicating where he was shot. *Pikon*, on top of his body, a 【Ｄｅａｄ】 marker appeared.

In other words, death (shibou).

“Hm? ——Whaa?”

The man pounding away with his *minimi* noticed that his comrade had died. Their guns were roaring too much, so they could not hear the gun shots of their enemy at all.

“Oii! Guys! Hold fire!”

The man stopped firing and shouted out loud. Since this was inside a *game*, his voice reached his comrades.

“What’s wrong?” “Huh?” “What’s ‘rong?”

In the world that suddenly became quiet, they looked around restlessly, and discovered their comrade who was killed in action.

“W-what’s wrong? Did something happen?”

“Well, I don’t know that……”

“Don’t tell me, suicide?”

“H-he’s not that stupid, don’t you think!”

“Did he get shot from the forest?”

“During such a barrage?”

On the back of the FN MAG user who had said that, a red hit *effect* was induced. He escaped instant death, but his *hit point gauge* mercilessly decreased. It crossed the safe green zone and immediately went into yellow.

"Nuaaaa"

In agony because of the dull pain that arose in his back, the man bent his back, and shortly thereafter, the next bullet came flying and hit the back of his head. A blow to the vitals had the power of bringing instant death, so his *hit points*, which had decreased to about a third, were instantly wiped out.

The number of corpses with the 【Ｄｅａｄ】 *tag* increased by one, and hearing the sound of the two bullets echoing from the *buildings*——,

Realisation finally dawned on them, and all of the Zen-nihon *Machine Gun Lovers* understood the situation completely.

The man using the M60E3 faced his remaining comrades and shouted:

"A sniper! He's shooting from behind!"

Those were his last words in SJ.

His comrades saw. How a bullet hit his brow as he was turning, and he died instantly with just 1 bullet.

He should have seen the vivid *Bullet Line* extending towards him. However, unfortunately, his reaction speed wasn't high enough to avoid it immediately.

"Hide!"

"Uhya!"

The *Minimi* and *Negev* users *jumped* to the other side of the pile of rubble that they had lain on.

"Hm? What's going on? Huh?"

Her surroundings had suddenly become quiet, so LLENN, who had curled herself up and was sitting on the ground grasping her knees, stood up. The silence was too abrupt, so, for a moment, she thought that she could have been shot and died. 'Is this heaven, no, the waiting *area* that you are transported to after death?'

At her soliloquy,

"A *team* that was in the urban area finally came within the effective range of their guns. You did hear three gunshots from different guns, right? You've been saved."

M's calm, and just a tad glad, voice answered. Then,

"I'm coming to you now. Don't shoot me by mistake."

That phrase.

LLENN waited, shouting 'fi-nally!' in her mind.

Soon, the dark depths of the forest squirmed, and she recognised the large figure in camouflage clothes.

In the suddenly still world, M arrived at the shadow of a large tree 10 *metres* to the left of LLENN, and skillfully expanded his EBR's *bipod*, then lay down on top of the soil.

While M was peeking through the M14 EBR's *scope* in a prone posture,

"So……, what happened?"

Finally feeling relieved, LLENN asked, and finally, M answered.

"I didn't dare to tell you about it, but at the time of the *scan*, there was another *team* aside from those *machine gun* guys. They were within range to participate in the battle. Moreover, they were in the south, in the central part of the urban area."

"I see…… So those people hurriedly came, and attacked the people who were shooting at me, from behind."

"Right. Those *machine gun* guys either saw the *scan* and thought that there was still some distance between them and were negligent, or were surprised that you, LLENN, were too close, or completely overlooked it from the start. Either way, they were careless."

"Th-then! M-san, you understood that and decided to use me as a decoy?"

LLENN asked while showing her anger a bit, but…

"Right."

She had no words to reply with, due to how quickly he affirmed that.

M searched his pocket with a rummaging sound and,

"Take this."

Threw something as he faced LLENN.

'Basing on the size, a *grenade*?', thought LLENN and put herself on guard, but since there was absolutely no reason for him to attack a comrade, she immediately reassessed it. He threw that something to her with splendid *control*, and she herself splendidly caught it with just her

left hand.

It was a tiny monocle, in other words, a telescope[33] meant to be used with one eye. Some time ago, she had borrowed this from Pitohui and had used it. It was a convenient *item* that came with the ability to measure distance with a *laser*, and it should be considerably expensive to buy.

“You haven’t held one? Use it. For a while, observe the situation from here.”

“Th-thanks.”

LLENN transferred it to her right hand, and while having it in front of her dominant right eye, she sneakily and slowly peeked out from the shade of the tree.

No *Bullet Lines* could be seen in her vicinity, so at least for the moment, it seemed that there was no need to worry about being shot by the *machine gun* group.

If she was being targeted by an enemy on the other side—— in the case of not discovering the enemy, the initial *Bullet Line* would not be shown, so she could no longer do anything about it, but she believed that even they would probably defeat the enemy in their vicinity first. There should be another 5 minutes or more until the next *satellite scan* and the possibility of yet another enemy coming here was low.

“There were five *machine gun* bastards. Three are already dead.”

Just as M, who confirmed the situation through the *scope* of his M14 EBR, said, LLENN saw three men with 【Ｄｅａｄ】 *tag* shining over them beyond the *lens*. For a test, she pressed the *button* to measured the distance, and „197M“ was displayed.

[33] Binoculars and monocles are counted as types of telescopes in Japanese.

In that vicinity, in front of the pile of rubble, were the surviving two. They were guarding against the enemy from their backs, thus they were currently exposing their whole bodies to LLENN and M.

"Those two, they are not looking at us at all. M-san, can't we use this opportunity to shoot them?"

LLENN enquired. 200 *metres* should be a certain-hit distance for M's M14 EBR. But instead, she wanted to shoot and kill them with her P90. To pay them back for the scary feeling moments ago.

"You can't. Right now, we're not attacking them from here. I'm even giving you an order, so don't you dare shoot."

'Why', LLENN wanted to ask, but refrained from doing so.

"They're coming…… The main street on the left side. In the shadow of an upside down *bus*."

LLENN pointed her *lens* to the left at the street M indicated. About 150 *metres* away from the group, a large *bus* was toppled over and smashed, and human figures squirmed at its side.

"Ooh!"

Excited, LLENN increased the magnification by operating the device with her fingers. It *zoomed* smoothly like a *video camera*, and the device automatically focused, allowing her to recognise the details of those people.

The new enemy *team* comprised four people. Their black and dark brown camouflage matching clothes were like a *team* uniform. On their heads, they had similarly camouflage-patterned helmets. Additionally, they were wearing bank robber-like black ski masks, called ≪*balaclava*≫, and she could not see their faces at all.

The four currently moved in a vertical line, and the man in the vanguard, holding a black and *slim rifle*, was smoothly, as if his gun wasn't shaking at all, advancing forward.

Judging from their appearance, the three following him from the back were holding the same guns, and maintaining a reasonable distance of about 2 *metres*. Only the last one of them occasionally turned around and watched their rear.

LLENN could not recognise the type of *rifle*, but as if reading her thoughts,

"≪FALs≫ huh. 7.62 *mm*. It's the airborne troop *short version*."

She heard M's voice.

A FAL had a high accuracy rate *semi auto* fire, along with the power of 7.62 *mm* bullets, thus they were popular among *players*. The four men were holding the airborne troop *version* of that FAL. It was a *model* with a folding *stock* and a rather short barrel that made it easier to use.

The group of four with matching guns and matching masks and camouflage clothes continued moving from the shadow of the bus to the side of a pile of rubble, then to the shadow of another broken vehicle without pause.

Before they moved out from the corner of their cover, LLENN saw the man in the vanguard holding something out in front of him, and wondering what it was, she tried *zooming* in and realised that it was a small mirror attached to the tip of a pole.

'I get it, they're confirming what's around the corner, LLENN admired.

The destination of the four was, of course, the location where the two *machine gun* guys that were bewildered at the loss of their comrades, and

hadn't moved at all since then.

"The masked guys sure know what they're doing. They're cooperating."

M revealed his impression of them, and, while peeking through the monocle, LLENN asked.

"That *team* only has four people?"

"No. There are more."

"How? Do you see them? Where?"

"I haven't found them, but they are advancing towards the position of those two guys by following one of the shortest paths while completely hiding themselves. Someone has to be giving them instructions from the top of a *building*. The other two are probably watching from the window of a *building*. They're definitely carrying sniper rifles. They are also the guys who shot those three *machine gun* guys."

'Uhya', uttered LLENN, and decreased the magnification.

In a situation when the position of the opponent was unknown, the *Bullet Lines* would not be shown. *Snipers* who could shoot all of a sudden and were capable of instantly killing someone in one bullet were disliked in both the real world and in GGO.

There were *buildings* of various sizes lined up on the other side of the pile of rubble, so there were just as many *points* suitable for sniping. LLENN tried observing carefully again, but saw neither the figures of the people, nor their guns.

"They're not there."

"They're not in a place where you can find them easily. Exposing their guns and bodies as they shoot is the death of a *sniper*."

A persuasive answer came from M. And then,

"Dividing their *team* with merely six members is a bold strategy. A *team* that can do so without hesitation is strong."

Words of appraisal as well.

"Those two are going to be hit soon."

At M's words, LLENN, who had still been looking for the *snipers*, returned her field of vision to the two machine gun guys.

The four masked guys got within 50 *metres* range of the two *machine gun* guys, and continued approaching by treading through piles of rubble.

The two guys, who hadn't noticed this at all, seemed to talking about something in a panic, but, of course, LLENN could not hear it.

"Let's get out of here!"

"But, if we poke our heads out, we'll be shot!"

'Something like that?', LLENN imagined.

As LLENN watched attentively, the four guys, who had approached the pile of rubble merely 20 *metres* away before their targets, finished their preparations for an attack. With faint gestures, they suddenly spread out.

The one in the vanguard threw a grenade. It fell and exploded in a place slightly away from their two targets where it wouldn't deal great damage, but that was sufficient.

The two *machine gun* guys stood up in a panic and ran away. The remaining three attackers targeted their backs and began quickly and

accurately firing at them with *rhythmically* resounding gunshots.

The two hadn't managed to get far, so, without even being able to counterattack, they collapsed on the spot with gaudy, red hit *effects* flashing and ended up with the same fate as their comrades.

"Sigh……"

It was unclear whether LLENN's sigh was mourning that the two *characters* were killed in action, or feeling sorry that they left SJ, or lamenting that she wanted to kill them herself.

LLENN looked at the time and saw that it was 14:14.

'Only 4 minutes?', LLENN was surprised.

'There are 6 minutes until the *scan*. Right now, the position of those four guys is almost completely visible and, moreover, they're not aware of us. It's our *chance*.'

"M-san, don't let them get away!"

LLENN said with a unruly smile, but the answer was *no*.

"No way. If there were only one of them, you would be able to kill him, but the others would end up hiding. In that case, we'd have no choice but to run back into the forest. Let it pass. Those guys should be expecting us to have retreated deeper into the forest."

Uugh, LLENN groaned in her mind. She refused to go back to the disadvantageous forest after all their effort of coming here.

"Leaving that aside, I want to observe them a bit more."

She decided to follow M's words. At the very least, it was true that they

could safely observe from their position for another 5 minutes.

Returning her gaze to her monocle, she saw that the four figures had disappeared. They couldn't be seen anywhere. The guys had probably skillfully retreated.

30 seconds afterwards,

"There they are."

Was M's voice.

"LLENN. Look at the *building designed* with a warped outer wall. Its middle floors."

Finding the indicated *building* and *zooming* in,

"Ah! There they are!"

There, she saw the figure of the person that she was looking for. On the middle, probably tenth floor, of the *building*, *designed* like the sail of a *yacht*. There was a person at a window with all of its *glass* blown away. He was carrying a long and narrow *rifle*.

She measured the distance to be 503 *metres*, so he was probably about 300 *metres* away from those *machine gun* guys. For a sniper with high-precision sniper rifles and skill, it was a distance where he could easily target the vitals.

Just as LLENN thought 'What is he going to do?' the guy threw a long *rope* towards the ground as if to answer her.

And then, the guy immediately put the *rope* in front of his body and straddled it, then, with his legs kicking away the outer wall of the *building*, he smoothly descended. The height was close to 30 *metres*, but, in the blink of an eye, he hid behind a pile of rubble concealing the

ground and disappeared. Next, the second one descended. Just like the other one, he instantly disappeared from sight. The only thing that remained afterwards was the slightly swaying *rope*. And even it disappeared, as if put away into *storage*.

"What is that? Amazing!"

LLENN innocently praised.

"It's *rappelling*. Descending by using a *rope*."

"Wow. Useful for vertical movement, huh. Much faster than going down the stairs, huh. There's a *skill* like that. I kinda want it."

"It's a bit different for them."

"Hm?"

"With the *rappelling skill* in GGO, you can't go down as fast as they did. I know that since I've tried it."

At M's answer, LLENN inclined her head,

"Then, how did those people do it?"

"That was the ability of the *player*."

"*Player* ability? What does that mean?"

Not being able to quickly understand what M said, LLENN turned her face towards him and asked. While holding the M14 EBR and peeking through the scome, M,

"In other words, the people playing GGO can do that in *RL*, is what it means."

"Ah, I get it! I've just remembered what I've heard from Pito-san!"

In all VR *games*, including GGO, there were two types of „things that one can do".

The first was—— what the *character* can do.

In other words, things that anyone could do automatically if their *character* obtained the required *skill* in exchange for experience points.

In GGO, there were things like high-power bomb production, gun part and knife production, increasing sniping accuracy rate, seeing details from afar with astounding eyesight—— and a variety of other abilities.

Skills also had *levels*, so either the success rate, speed or grade would increase in proportion to how much the skill was raised.

And, the other was——, things that the *player* could do in *RL* even without having the *skill* .

Naturally, it was possible for *players* to do what they could in *RL* even without taking the *skill*. Since the body would according to the nerve impulses detected by the *AmuSphere*.

For example, calligraphy. This didn't exist in GGO, but *characters* that obtained a *skill* „writing characters beautifully" could achieve magnificent handwriting by just trying to write as they always do.

On the other hand, *players* who were fond of handwriting in *RL* could do that even without taking the *skill*. Of course, such a person could not write better than they had learned in *RL*.

Naturally, what one could do with a *skill* could only be done in the *game*.

Basically, just because someone obtained a calligraphy *skill*, that doesn't

mean they would be able to write beautiful characters in the real world.

"In other words, even smoothly descending with a *rope*, rappe…… what's it called again?"

" *Rappelling*."

"Yeah that. Does it mean that those people can do that in *RL*? That's amazing. Maybe they're mountain climbers?"

LLENN carefreely said, frankly admiring them, but…

"It would be nice if they were."

M's words sounded very serious.

Having returned her view to the monocle, LLENN looked at the four men going into the distance, while carefully watching their surroundings, to meet up with the other two men, and said,

"M-san, based on your way of speaking, it seems you know who those people are in *RL*?"

"Just a guess."

"Which is?"

LLENN couldn't guess what he was guessing, so she frankly enquired.

The answer that came to her left ear was,

"Seeing their careful and disciplined movements, and nimble *rappelling*, I thought. That those guys are probably fighting *pros*."

"*Pro*? Come again?"

Without her understanding the meaning, LLENN moved the monocle away from her eye, as the four had disappeared, and looked at M, who returned the look. His stern face looked a bit diffident.

His mouth moved.

"Literally, „people who make money by fighting". Those six guys are—— either working in the police, or in the special forces of the Japan Coast Guard, or are personnel of the Self-Defence Force."

Chapter 7 – A Battle Against Pros

14:17.

Less than 3 minutes until the second *satellite scan*. That was also how long they would be at the edge of the forest.

"Wha? What did you say! Aren't they cheating? ——The participation of *pros* in the game is prohibited!"

Hearing M's guess that the six people of remarkable ability were fighting *pros*, LLENN took offence.

M, who seemed to be thinking about something, answered after several seconds.

"There shouldn't really be a *rule* about prohibition. I don't know if they're here officially or independently, but it's not strange for them to use GGO as part of their training and participating in SJ to test their ability. This has been hypothesised ever since the *FullDive* technology was created."

Hearing M's overly calm words, LLENN thought 'Well, that is true.' and decided to go back to thinking about SJ. While playing a *game*, she had

to think about the *game*.

"What should we do? Right now, those people are the closest team, right? If we don't defeat them, we can't take up positions in the urban area, right? With them as our opponents, can we really win?"

M replied immediately.

"Impossible."

"That fast!"

"They're opponents that I'm not sure we'd be able to win against even if we had six people. Winning with two people is just impossible. Even if we decreased their ranks by one just now…… well, it would probably be the same."

"Then what do we do? I know! Why don't we take up positions here? You know, if any *team* crosses the highway, we could shoot them from here!"

"I've thought about that, but that's definitely unfavourable. There's a *sniper* on the other side. If you peek out, you'll be shot immediately. Meanwhile, an enemy *team* might come from the west."

LLENN, whose suggestions were cut down one after another, did not get angry, as she agreed with each comment.

They continued being on lookout in the forest; the clock displayed 14:19. Only 1 minute until the next *satellite scan*.

"What are we going to do? What are we going to do next?"

LLENN was slightly panicking, as she was unable to do anything within the 20 minutes after the *game* started, and

“Do you feel lucky? Has your life so far been blessed with good luck?”

M suddenly asked this question.

“Come again? I wonder……”

Concerning her height, her good luck was close to zero, but that aside, she thought about how she was born in an affluent household, surrounded by kind family members, and how she was raised without any problems,

“Well, yeah. I’ve been *lucky*. I’m a *lucky girl*!”

She answered, although bluffing a bit.

“Good. Let’s bet on that good luck. *Check* the next *scan* here, and if we are lucky, we'll immediately rush towards the highway. Prepare in advance.”

“G-gotcha, is there time to ask for the reason?”

40 seconds remaining.

“Yes. This is just my guess, but I believe that a considerable number of other participating *teams* would gather in the urban area because of that loud battle just now. In that case, there’s a high chance that there is a *team* close to that company of *pros* and another battle would ensue right after the scan. Using that as a diversion, we’ll run through the highway in the blink of an eye. We’re going to abandon the idea of hiding in the urban area, and instead go for the centre of the residential area. After the next *scan*, we’ll go to the wilderness from there.”

“I see…… Gotcha.”

20 seconds remaining.

"Count the dots on the scan to find out the number of annihilated *teams*. Hammer the location of the surviving *teams* into your head. Of course, you can ignore the ones that are far away. The enemies that we can encounter within 10 minutes, or those who are within 3 *km* range from us, are the threats."

While saying that, M got up and took out his *satellite scan* terminal. LLENN followed suit. And then, the screen lit up.

14:20.

SJ's second *satellite scan* began.

This was the first *scan* that LLENN saw. She concentrated on staring at the screen. Just the outline was enough, as she wanted to know the location of her opponents. She did not want to go through that march, in which she did not know where her enemies were, again.

As if the artificial satellite was coming from the north-west, dots on the map lit up one by one from the upper-left side of the map on the terminal's screen. Moreover, it was fast, so there probably wasn't much time until the *scan* ended.

"Let's see, as for the annihilated *teams*……"

The *teams* that have left SJ were displayed as inconspicuous gray dots. While counting those, LLENN memorised the location of the shining dots.

In the north-western prairie, there was one annihilated *team*. Another one in the swamp below it. As for the forest, the *teams* that were shooting each other at the beginning seemed to have avoided annihilation - no wipe outs. As for the desert and wilderness, since the field of vision there is quite open, it seems that there were a considerable number of battles there - four wipe outs in total.

Right now, the area up to the very south-eastern edge was *scanned* completely.

Even without touching them to confirm names, it was obvious that the dot shining on the border of the forest and highway referred to them. There were another two dots in the forest, but fortunately, they were 3 *km* away.

The gray dot at the north extremity of the urban area was, of course, the *machine gun* group. In other words, in merely 20 minutes, seven *teams* have already dropped out of the *battle royale*, and sixteen remained.

Of course, it was impossible to tell whether all of the members of a *team* survived unwounded, or only a single person remained.

Speaking of the *pro* group that displayed their frightening power just now——,

They were in the urban area as expected. About 1 and a half *km* away from them.

They overlapped with a building, so they were probably at a high location. It was obvious that the two people who *rappelled* down the building ran at full-speed and quickly set up in another *building*. The skilful *snipers* keeping a watchful eye on the surroundings from a place with a good field of vision and cooperating with their comrades on the ground—— it was a strategy that could also be called an iron wall.

And so,

"Ah!"

LLENN unintentionally shouted.

Wasn't that a light dot in the square to the south of the *pro* group, and another two in the square to the left?

"M-san! Look!"

"How lucky. Us two. On the other hand—— those guys aren't lucky."

LLENN raised her face and saw M, unusually, smiling.

"Then!"

"Yeah. We'll leave those unlucky three *teams* to the *pro* group and run. You can cast aside the *poncho*."

Without even waiting for the *scan* to end, the two put away their terminals.

LLENN got her head out of her *poncho* and threw the *poncho* away to her rear. Her full-*pink* appearance. In a half-rising posture, M folded his M14 EBR's *bipod* and finished his preparations for running out of the forest.

They had to rush out of the forest, where trees protected them, into a dangerous location once again.

"Go on my command. Not yet——"

Gulp, LLENN swallowed her saliva and put more strength into the hand holding her P90.

At the next moment, they heard gunshots from the urban area.

A *mix* of light and heavy gunshots. A considerably loud start of a battle. It's almost unmistakably the three *teams* making contact.

"Alright, go! Go! Go!"

At M's command, LLENN broke into a run. Out of the forest and

towards the grassy slope. Running at full-speed towards the highway.

“But wait! I shouldn’t run off too far, right?”

LLENN asked M while running,

“Whenever you do so, I’ll tell you to stop.”

Was his answer.

‘Hu-h? He told me to stick together in the forest, but I have to be the forerunner going ahead of him? Wouldn’t I be the one to get shot first?’

Although LLENN realised this, it was too late to return.

‘Honestly, using the *leader* as a decoy, this *black team*[34] is such a sweatshop!’

While thinking about such things, LLENN agilely jumped over the *guardrails* of the highway with her tiny body.

“M-san! No enemies in sight nearby.”

“Alright. Wait until I catch up.”

LLENN and M continued running through the highway.

LLENN was leading by dashing at the speed of an average sprinter or faster.

Having trained her agility, she was able to run at the speed of a car. At her rapidly increasing „maximum speed“, LLENN would feel befuddled.

[34] In Japanese, the equivalent of the expression “sweatshop” is ブラック企業 (black business), thus a “black team” is a derogatory term for a team that abuses its members.

To her right was the forest and to her left was the urban area. While looking out for enemies in her field of vision, she waited for M, who came from behind in the shadow of a broken car.

When she first emerged from the forest, she noticed that absolutely no wind was blowing in this *field*. This was considerably advantageous for a *sniper*.

M was much more slow-footed than LLENN, but even so he came kicking the *concrete* at full-speed. Once he slid into a place where he could hide his large figure,

"Alright go!"

He ordered while holding his M14 EBR so that he could always provide supporting fire.

Their figures were most likely completely visible from the forest or urban area while they were running, but no one fired at them.

Instead, they heard loud sounds of a battle all the time.

*　*　*

Turning the clock back a bit to 14:20. Just before the second *scan*——,

What M expected occurred in the urban area.

Some time ago, hearing the loud noise of battle mainly caused by the Zen-nihon *Machine Gun Lovers*,

'„I don't know who that was, but with so much shooting, the surviving *team* can't be unscratched."'

The three *teams* in the vicinity with the exact same idea gathered in the urban area, drawn in by the noise of battle. Of course, they could not

have known that the other party was completely unharmed, and moreover, was comprised of highly-skilled members.

And so, just after the second *scan* began——,

"Wha?" "Are you kidding me!"

The two teams that were in the same square and only about 200 *metres* apart were completely surprised. The *routes* to their destination were different, so they had yet to see each other, but their enemy was really close.

At that moment, the two *teams*' course of action greatly diverged.

One of the *teams* had members wearing uniform jumpsuits, with a hornet *motif emblem* attached to their left arms.

It was a group with their *main arms* mainly being *submachine guns* like ≪H&K MP5≫, ≪*Walther* MPL≫, and consisted of only nimble *characters* that stressed the importance of agility.

All six of them,

"Oh whatever, let's get them! Everyone, let them have it with everything you've go-ooo-t!"

"Ah yeah!" "Attaaack!" "*Roger*!" "Let's get'em!" "Mothe-er!"

Began their assault in cheers, as if to say that this was their place of death. They *dashed* energetically through the broad road, towards the opponents that were probably around the corner.

The other *team* had tattered garments. All of them wore a green *scarf* around their necks as their *team*'s *icon*, .

These guys, unfortunately, could not make a prompt decision and promptly execute it.

"They're awfully close! Le-Let's run away!"

"No, there's another *team* down the slope! And another up in the *buildings*! We have nowhere to run away! We need to attack them head——"

"Idiot! What are you going to do if they surround us? Are you planning to hide inside the buildings——"

"I don't wanna end up in an indoor battle!"

"You guys, stop squabbling! Follow your *leader*'s orders."

As they continued quarrelling, they were suddenly showered with bullets by the *team* that came from the opposite side of the road.

Submachine guns excelled in rapid-fire power, but as they primarily used pistol ammo, the *damage* dealt wasn't as great.

Only one of the two unlucky people, who were shot at the same time, died during the surprise attack.

The remaining five people who were hit but did not die resolved for the fact that they no longer had a way to escape and began a ferocious counterattack against their opponents. Guns like the ≪AKM≫ and the ≪M16A3≫ began roaring.

Atop the broad road, a grandiose battle between the two groups, holding their ground less than 100 *metres* away, shooting ceaselessly and throwing grenades at each other, erupted.

Both parties had a sufficiently clear view of their opponents' position, thus whoever turned their backs would lose. Rather than hiding, they

continued to shoot and shoot, change their *magazines* and shoot again——

Before long, one of them died, then another one, and thus a grand battle of attrition began.

The *cameras* floating in the sky continued overlooking the battle heartlessly.

Snickering at this scene was another *team* of men, who were about 1 *km* away.

The six members were all wearing reddish brown camouflaged clothes and were equipped with ≪AC—556F≫ *assault rifles* made by *Sturm, Ruger* and Co..

This was a ≪*Mini*-14≫ gun, which was like an M14 *downsized* to 5.56 mm, but with a metal folding stock attached and with the ability to shoot in *full auto*. It was *compact* and its performance was reasonably good, but it was an unpopular and cheap gun in GGO.

Having heard the sounds of a battle erupting nearby, the *team leader*,

"Alrighty! Those guys made contact! Let's go around and ambush them!"

Said these words. A comrade of his asked.

"What are we going to do about those guys up in the *building*?"

"They're still too far. They're not in a suitable range to take us on with snipers. They won't hit us if we run."

"I see."

"Alright, everyone, let's go!"

Thus, this *team* began running, planning to benefit from the other teams' fight.

In order to run at a full-sprint on a broad road, they ran along the centre of the road, rather than by the side of the buildings littered with plenty of debris, and thus,

"Confirmed a *team* in the south side. Six heads. Their weapons - AC—556F. From now on, we'll dub them „*delta*".

It wasn't as if they would know that they were being observed by the snipers via binoculars from within the building, and that the snipers had even given them an alias.

The *delta leader*'s judgement that they wouldn't be sniped at this range as they ran was by no means wrong.

At a 1 *km* distance, an ordinary sniper rifle wouldn't be able to hit them. The targets were so far away that a sniper would need to have an anti-materiel rifle, which was still effective at this range, as well as befitting remarkable skill. The judgement that the level of threat would be low was reasonable.

However, their misfortune was that the *satellite scan* did not display the team's excellent detached force of four on the ground.

The men with their faces hidden in *balaclava* calmly sent orders to their four comrades via their communication *items*.

"*Delta* are advancing to the west along the third southern road. Let them pass by the side of the cinema, then follow them. Wait until the battle between *bravo* and *charlie* is over."

"Oh, fuck this!"

The man holding an AKM, an improved version of the AK-47 that greatly resembled the original in outward appearance, cursed loudly.

The *style* of his garments was based on the militia that could be found in troubled areas in the world—— *jeans* and a leather jacket, with a *magazine chest rig* on his chest. He had a green *scarf* on his neck.

The man was lying, holding his gun horizontally, at the side of a broken vehicle left on the large street. He could only look through the underside of the car, with its *punctured tires* , to see what lay ahead of him, but he didn't see anything move in his narrow field of vision.

"O-oi! Is anyone nearby?"

He shouted with a desperate look, but there was no answer.

It seemed that all of his comrades that had been working together until just a few moments ago had either died or ran away.

His own *hit points* had been reduced considerably. He had been hit with 5 bullets at close range by the *submachine guns* of the assaulting enemy team. Of course, they counterattacked, so he was sure that he killed one of them by hitting him in the head with several bullets, and another one should have been hit in the legs.

And then, 5 seconds after he asked,

"Ooo! I'm ali—ve!"

He heard this answer from somewhere.

A smile of relief returned to the man's face. And then,

"Oo! Where are you? Are you alright?"

"Yeah, somehow I am! But my hit points are in the deep red!"

He clearly heard the second answer coming from much closer than before. He probably left the building he had been hiding in and came to him.

"Alright! Let's link up and run away."

The man said as he raised his AKM, but the answer was,

"Ah, that's impossible!"

"Why?"

The man should have been more composed before he asked.

If he was, he would have probably seen the information in the upper-leftmost corner of his field of vision, in other words, the *hit points* of his comrades, by moving his eyes. He would have realised that all of them were completely black, and all the names were marked with an X symbol.

"Well, look! That's because——"

Sticking his head out from the shadow of the car, he saw his conversational partner 6 *metres* in front of him. The man wearing a black jumpsuit firmly held an A3 *type* MP5, and pointed his muzzle at him. Red lines that spread from it entered his vision, and dyed his field of vision in deep red.

"I am an enemy, you see!"

He fired once.

The 9 *mm Parabellum* bullet fired from the MP5 created a vivid hit *effect* in his right eye. The man lost strength in his body and fell sideways. His AKM fell on the *concrete* and made a dull metallic sound.

"Hah……"

The man who shot with the MP5 sat on the ground. Signs of being shot shone throughout his body, he had barely any *hit points* left and was in the deep red.

He turned around and saw the corpses of both enemies and allies, with a 【Ｄｅａｄ】 *marker* shining above, scattered all around the large road. He calmed down, looked at the information displayed in the left corner of his field of vision, and saw that all but him were wiped out.

"Aah…… What am I going to do alone after this? I wonder if I should surrender."

Such a mutter unintentionally came from his mouth.

However, immediately afterwards,

"No, well, I should try holding out until I die……"

As he said this, he took out a cylindrical first aid *kit* from his chest *pocket*, and applied it to the nape of his neck. With his *hit points* flashing, his *gauge* began to recover.

The man looked at his wristwatch, and saw that it was 14:27. Before he went out to hide as he recovered his *hit points* over the next three minutes,

"It's a hit-or-miss!"

The man got up with a smile to start running again, but his body——

Was pierced by 5.56 *mm* bullets that came flying at him in succession, and his recovering *hit points* were quickly reduced to zero.

The amount of corpses on the large street that could no longer speak increased further by one more.

The man, who shot ceaselessly in *full auto* with his AC—556F from the other side of the road,

"Aw yeah! That's what I call profiting while others fight, score!"

Energetically raised his right fist in joy.

It was a *team* that had been hiding in the shadow of a *building* until the battle ended.

Since around 1 minute ago, they had been observing the development of the melee. They thought to attack anyone who tried to run away, but almost everybody died before that.

It seemed that the MP5 guy was the last one standing, thus the *leader* slowly came out from the corner of the building and gunned him down.

"We did it! *Battle royales* are nice because things like this happen. It's an easy victory when we can attack them from behind!"

A *team member* standing by behind a building, diligently guarding the rear, said cheerfully.

"Well, we'll end up the same if we let our guard down."

Just as the *leader* said those self-admonishing words, four powerful *plasma grenades* fell out of the fifth floor window.

A bluish-white light of explosion completely enveloped them, and

wiped out their *hit points* completely——

They personally learned that, in a street fight, they had to watch not only their surroundings, but for attacks from above as well.

The masked man who threw the *plasma grenades* instantly contacted his men who were far away.

"*Bravo, charlie*, and *delta*. Annihilation confirmed. No injuries."

A masked man inside a *building*,

"Roger. Check the next *scan* at your position. Wait for further instructions while being on guard for any attack from any direction."

Answered thus.

Another man sat nearby, with his *Remington*-made, *bolt action* sniper rifle ≪M24≫ placed on a *camera* tripod. He was the man who massacred the *machine gun* group with his accurate sniping.

Without raising his head, he asked his *leader*,

"About that *pink* guy who ran through the highway at a breakneck speed, and the huge guy who followed him just now—— What are we going to do about them?"

*　*　*

At 14:29, just before the third *satellite scan*,

"Hyaa! We did it we did it!"

"We made it somehow."

LLENN and M finished running through the highway without seeing

any enemies, and reached the residential area at the centre of the *map*.

"And nobody fired at us!"

"Yeah."

While moving out of the urban area and the forest, they constantly heard loud sounds of battle, but there wasn't a single bullet aimed at them.

Of course, they were likely held down by someone, but there was the possibility that nobody fired at them as they judged that they wouldn't be able to hit their targets since they were running.

They had run approximately 3 *km*, so their average speed was about 18 *km* per hour.

A *marathon* runner's *average* speed was 20 *km* per hour, so their quick *pace* was quite good. Incidentally, LLENN, who had raised her agility, could go much faster than that, but it was a speed that M's „*character* ability" could barely pull off.

The fact that they weren't breathless, didn't sweat, and their throats weren't thirsty after all that running was the good thing about being in a VR *game*.

The region the two had arrived at was filled with *apartment* houses and low-rise residences, and, aside from the road, it had an obstructed view.

No matter how they looked at it, the buildings reminded them of a foreign, rather than a Japanese, exclusive residential district.

Of course, it was a *ghost town*, thus the feeling of desolation wasn't odd. They also saw corroded cars with *punctured* tires and large trees that had

toppled over due to their growth on the road. In the garden, there was a large lawn mower that had become rusty and red.

The buildings looked to be crumbling, and a lot of them had collapsed. The paved road was full of cracks and grass grew vigorously out of those crevices. The submerged region should be wide, but, fortunately, the area they were in had not been flooded.

The two approached the entranceway of a detached house with a barren lawn and withered trees, and, just to be sure, they *checked* in case anyone had set *traps*.

The possibility that the *team* who had their *starting* point here set up a large number of *grenades* wasn't zero. A *booby trap* which consisted of a *wire* being set along the entrance was a *simple* trap, but it was easy to get caught in it.

"It's fine. Enter slowly. Watch out for *traps* indoors too."

"Roger."

The two slowly entered, and *checked* for *traps* again. Upon confirming that it was safe, they hid indoors.

The *living room* in the house was cluttered, but not to the extent that they couldn't enter; it was disordered in a pleasant manner.

Out of consideration, there were no human remains, in other words, human bones, left behind by the people that passed away during the last war in GGO *fields*. If it was reproduced, the urban and other areas would end up looking like a picture of Hell, full of human bones.

However, aside from that, the production was truly impressive and finely done.

Even in the house that LLENN and M had intruded upon, there were plenty of *items* that shed light on the life of the people before the last war.

There was a picture of a smiling family in a silver *frame* on the fireplace where a bit of grass grew. There were broken and unbroken dishes in the sink. There were seemingly old magazines and newspapers scattered around at the side of the *sofa*.

The details of how this Earth came to a great war were written in these newspapers and magazines. Unfortunately, they were all in English.

She once heard this story from Pitohui.

After taking down a dog-like *monster* in the ruins of a small church, Pitohui entered a room further inside. There, she found a beautiful *wedding dress* and *tuxedo*, which glittered due to the skylight, hanging on a clothes hanger.

"It was a scene that made me break into tears. „Let's get married, even if the war that destroys humanity is drawing near", that's the kind of emotion of two people who loved each other that they conveyed. It was as if even that doggy was frantically trying to protect them."

Pitohui gave an unusual gentle smile,

"That's a nice story."

LLENN shared her honest impression,

"So, I tore both the dress and tuxedo into shreds with my *shotgun*."

"What a waste!"

"Well, it'll respawn when the next guy finds it."

Setting Pitohui's lovely personality aside, GGO's *graphics designer* who thought about such details and reproduced them did a terrific job.

Several more seconds until 14:30, the third *scan*. LLENN's wristwatch had stopped vibrating a long time ago.

The two took out their *satellite scan* terminals and produced a map before their eyes. Last time, a total of seven *teams* had dropped out and sixteen survived; now then, how much has changed in 10 minutes?

The third *scan* began from the south-southeast and continued to the north-northwest. Speaking in clock terms, it would be from 5 o'clock to 11 o'clock. It seemed that the satellite's orbit was high, as the *scan* was much slower than before. Having calmed down, LLENN looked at the map and decided to count the number of surviving teams.

One by one, dots began appearing in the southern *fields*, the desert and wilderness zones.

Then, gray dots denoting wiped out *teams* began rapidly appearing. Although it was wide, there were eight dots in this *area* alone. 10 minutes ago it was four, thus the count had doubled.

In particular, there were three new gray dots near one another in the surroundings of a ruins in the centre. Even LLENN understood what happened. They had probably tried to take control of an advantageous ruins area and ended up in a melee fight.

In this *area*, the survivors numbered only two *teams* at the moment. Both of them were at least 5 *km* apart from east to west, and a bit away from

any dead *teams* too.

LLENN couldn't tell how many members survived, so she had absolutely no idea how strong these two *teams* were either. Did they possess frightening power, with which they had mostly slaughtered other *teams*, and were now moving without worry, or were they left with a single man, who was frantically trying to escape?

Either way, both groups were far away from them, thus it seemed that LLENN's group could ignore them for the next 10 minutes.

As the *scan* proceeded to the north, it displayed the urban area.

What they saw then were three gray dots in mostly the same place. And close to them, there was a dot of a surviving *team* shining in the same place as last time. This was all in perfect accordance to M's prediction,

"Wow……"

LLENN looked at M, then at that *pro* group and let out her impression.

As the *scan* drew close to the centre of the map, the residential area, LLENN tensed up. The north-eastern, in other words, upper-right, part of this *area* was where they were located at. If any other dots lit up, those would be the people that they would have to fight against next. It was possible that they had not noticed that someone was hiding in the next, no, this very house.

The result was——,

"No one's here…… Whew!"

In the residential area, there was unmistakably only a single dot. There were no dead *teams* either.

The *scan* proceeded to the north; there were zero new dead *teams* in the swamp. There was one surviving *team*, and it seemed that it had taken up position at the crashed spaceship.

In the north-western prairie, there were two dead *teams*. In other words, the count increased by one since last time. There was only one surviving *team* and, if this *team* handled both the other teams, they were probably powerful.

And lastly, inside the forest, there were no deaths and the survivors numbered two like last time. Looking at it closely, these two *teams* had barely moved at all since the last *scan*.

At the moment, there were eight new wiped-out *teams*, and the total now rose to fifteen *teams*. The survivors numbered eight *teams*. With such progress in just 30 minutes, SJ would probably end within 1 hour, just as Pitohui had said.

The *scan* hadn't disappeared yet, but M raised his rough face. Time for a strategy meeting.

"We're lucky."

M first said that, and LLENN cheerfully gave a large nod. And then,

"M-san, who do you think will become the next threat to us?"

M answered in his unchanged calm tone.

"First of all, the two *teams* in the forest are close, but we'll ignore them. Both teams seem to be stubbornly glaring at each other. They've probably lost some of their comrades in the first battle and they probably want to settle the score."

"Probably. They're the kind of guys who are waiting in vain to ambush each other."

"We'll also ignore the *team* in the prairie, as we are sufficiently far away. Let's hope that those guys are planning to attack the forest *teams* from behind. About the *team* in the swamp spaceship, they're probably the ones who took care of the ambushing sniper *team*. They're currently in an advantageous position, so, unless an extreme case arises, they won't move out."

"Hmmhmm"

"As for the two *teams* in the desert and wilderness, honestly speaking, I can't anticipate their move. Are they skilled or are they merely the remnants of a defeated team? Particularly, I can't read the actions of the *team* that's near the ruins. They should be taking up positions in the ruins, but why aren't they doing so?"

"Yeah, that's what I thought too."

"Even so, we can ignore them for now until the next *scan*. The problem is——"

"As I expected…… those *pros*? They're in the city."

"Yeah. ——We have no chance of winning without taking them down. Now that the number of *teams* decreased considerably, they're probably going to come out of the urban area. Their goal isn't victory, but to gain battle experience, so the odds of them continously ambushing people is low."

"But they're strong, right? We can't win, right?"

At LLENN's words,

"Yeah."

M nodded once. And then, he laughed while grinning broadly.

"But, having seen this *scan*, I've noticed a chance of winning, albeit a low one. If we do well, we can possibly win against those guys."

"Ooh!"

"For that, LLENN, your help is needed. You'll likely need to shoot with all you have and put in great effort."

"Ooh! That's fine! I'll do whatever it takes! Tell me your plan!"

"Alright. First——"

Chapter 8 – Trap

The wristwatch on LLENN's left arm vibrated.

She was in complete darkness, so she could not see, but she knew the time. 14:39:30. It was the *alarm* that rang when 30 seconds remained before the fourth *satellite scan*.

'Is this plan really going to go well……'

M told her not to speak carelessly, so LLENN could not even mutter. She could only say so in her mind.

'Yet another awful plan! Even though I'm the *leader*!'

The thing that she had thought about the longest during the past 10 minutes was certainly this.

Be that as it may, ever since SJ started, M had only come up with plans that ignored LLENN's safety, so she was no longer angry about it.

It was a *game*, so she did not mind dying. However, she had not once been able to go wild. Her beloved gun, her P90, had not fired a single bullet either. At the very least, she wanted to go on a rampage before dying.

The fourth *satellite scan* would begin very soon, but LLENN couldn't see it.

She could only hold her P90 tight and remain still in this complete darkness.

If she had claustrophobia, her state of mind would deteriorate, the safety device would activate, and the *AmuSphere* would forcefully cut the line. 'It's a good thing that I like taking naps in a closet', LLENN thought.

"The *scan* is about to begin. Prepare so that you can come out whenever I give you the signal to do so."

M's voice reached LLENN's ears.

"……"

Answering in silence, LLENN once again confirmed the position of her P90's safety with her fingertips.

10 minutes ago——

A masked man who saw the *scan* in the city,

"We need to move."

Expressed in just a few words.

The survivors numbered merely eight *teams* and, moreover, there were none nearby. The closest light dot was in the north-east of the residential area.

"I'm informing everyone. We'll name the enemy in the residential area „*echo*", and the enemy in the desert region „*foxtrot*"."

The *leader*'s voice went through the communication item, and reached the nearby sniper and the four men on the ground.

They named their enemies ABCDE in the order they were found……
and, in order to avoid hearing mistakes, called them in phonetic code (*phonetic code*).

In other words, the *machine gun* lover group was A - *alpha*.

The *team* that attacked with *submachine guns* and had hornet *emblems* was B - *bravo*.

The green *scarf team* that clashed with *bravo* was C - *charlie*.

The *team* wearing matching reddish brown camouflaged clothes was D - *delta*.

The *team* that has the *pink* chibi is E - *echo*.

The *team* in the southern desert is F - *foxtrot*.

"20 minutes ago, *echo* was at the southern tip of the forest and was under fire from *alpha*. On the highway, we confirmed only one guy in *desert pink* camouflage and another guy in green camouflage. The team has diminished to two members. We couldn't confirm their arms."

The *leader*, who didn't think that the *team* could have had only two people from the beginning, made a sensible judgement and informed his group.

"In the next 10 minutes, we'll move to the residential area and look for them. If we encounter the enemy, we attack them. If we can't find them, we search by using the 14:50 *scan*."

During his explanation, the *sniper* next to him took down his M24 from the tripod, and operated the *window* to put said tripod into *storage*. Once that was done, he took out a rope and finished his preparations to descend the *building*."

"Regroup at the intersection between the third southern and forth western roads. Vigilant standby."

All six members of the masked group gathered on the ground, and began advancing as fast as their *character* ability allowed.

The two of them in the vanguard vigilantly held their FALs, prepared to encounter *echo* at any moment.

If *echo* came their way, it was highly likely that they would abruptly encounter *echo* en route. Holding a gun so as to be able to shoot right away and running without the gun shaking was quite difficult; this was also a *player* skill.

Behind these two followed the *leader* and *sniper*. The two in the rear were constantly, constantly looking back, looking out for *foxtrot*'s pursuit.

And so——

Having reached the eastern tip of the residential district in about 8 minutes without any contact, they became even more vigilant and

advanced by the side of the houses.

This area was full of low-rise residences, thus the risk of sniping from a high-altitude was low, but they did not show any signs of negligence. They could use communication *items*, but they continued mostly in silence, *communicating* only through *hand signs*, and when they needed to cross the road, they would first check the area with a mirror, then one of them would *dash* at full-speed while two others covered him.

Thus, they slowly advanced to the west from the eastern tip of the residential area, and as they spread their search *area*, the clock struck 14:39.

"40 seconds till the *scan*. Halt. Be on the lookout from all sides."

All six of them took up positions at the corner of a broad street. The *leader* in the shadow of a large trash collection *truck*. With this, even if the *scan* revealed his position, the sturdy *truck* would protect him from attacks from the west.

The five subordinates spread out into the remaining three directions, in other words, the north, east and south, looking out for any enemies. If the *scan* revealed that there were enemies nearby, they were prepared to assault them.

Their watches announced that it was 14:40.

"The *scan* is starting."

Only the *leader* glanced at the *satellite scan* terminal.

"They're close!"

The *leader* of the mask group unintentionally shouted.

The result of the *scan* that was even slower than the last one was displayed on the screen that the leader looked at.

Based on the *scan* that began from the east, they confirmed that *foxtrot* was still in the desert-wilderness area. And so, as they were travelling to the east, the leader understood that they would not become a threat to his group.

Confirming that, he magnified the map to display the upper-leftmost region of the residential area, and their own position was certainly marked there. And so, speaking of their next mark, *echo*——

"Due north! 80 *metres* away!"

Weren't there two dots right next to each other? Magnifying the map as much as possible, it became clear that they were merely 80 *metres* away to the north. That was the vicinity of the large intersection at the end of the broad road that they were currently on.

The man who was watching the north side,

"I can't see them!"

Answered in a surprised voice. The 80 *metre* distance to the end of the road was short and the view was unobstructed, so one could clearly see it no matter how one looked at it. And yet, they did not see any human figures, so it was no wonder that he was surprised.

Right afterwards, the other man who was *supporting* him said,

"I can't see anything either! There's only a wide intersection there!"

"We can't find them. There are no vehicles in the intersection!"

The *leader*,

"Advance."

Gave this short order. Since they could not find their target, all they could do was approach the intersection until they did. If this wasn't GGO, one would think that the *scan* could be wrong, but…

Along with 'roger', four of the men began advancing with their FALs prepared.

They divided into two groups of two.

"The *scan* can't tell the altitude. It's highly likely that they're in a *manhole*. Watch out."

With his own FAL at the ready, the *leader* gave such an instruction while on the lookout for attacks from the opposite direction.

The *leader* looked at his still lit terminal once again, but it was certainly that location. As he could not magnify the map any further, all they could tell was that the enemy was somewhere in the intersection.

In a movie he once saw, the movement *scanner* detected an enemy moving close by, but the characters couldn't see him; in the end, it was revealed that they were on the ceiling. This time, the action was taking place in an intersection, thus it was unthinkable for them to be above them. In that case, the only possible alternative was for them to be below.

Just in case, the *leader* reduced the scale of the map to display a large *area*. This was so that he could inspect the location of other *teams*.

The survivors were: their own group, *echo*, *foxtrot*, and two groups in the swamp, only five teams in total.

The second *team* in the swamp was probably the prairie *team*, which came seeking battle. Aside from them, it seemed the *team* in the

southwestern region of the desert, and the two *teams* glaring at each other in the forest had either been wiped out, or had surrendered in the past 10 minutes.

Realising that it was safe for them to come into contact with *echo*, the leader felt relieved, but even though the enemy was really close, he still could not hear any firing from his subordinates.

Instead,

"We've arrived. There are…… no *manholes* at the intersection. I can't see any."

He heard the voice of one of his subordinates, who sounded like he was possessed by a fox.[35] He then heard:

"I can't find them either. Currently on the lookout in the northwest. No enemies."

"On the lookout in the northeast. I can neither find holes nor enemies."

"On the lookout in the north. Likewise, no signs of the enemy. I can't believe I'm saying this, but…… could it be a *scan error*?"

From the other three men.

"The odds of a *system error* are considerably low."

After giving such an answer, the *leader* continued by,

"Tell me about all the things that you see in the intersection. No matter how small."

Giving an order. His subordinates answered in bewilderment.

[35] A Japanese expression for "feeling bewildered". In Japanese folklore, foxes are depicted as intelligent beings that possess magical abilities, including being able to possess people.

"A cracked *asphalt* crossroad…… Short grass…… A rusty bicycle that had fallen to the ground……"

"A car *tyre*, together with the *wheel*, toppled sideways."

"Two small, toppled and withering tree trunks. A travelling *suitcase*. One, no, three empty cans."

"There's a *supermarket cart* on the sidewalk. A big, foreign-made one. Of course, there's nothing in it…… There are no holes in the ground!"

"Same here. No matter how many times I look at it, I can't find any holes."

'What is going on!', shouting this in his mind, the *leader* left the rear guard to the *sniper*, and took out binoculars from his pocket while turning around. In the binocular vision, he saw the intersection where his subordinates were, and where " *echo* was supposed to be".

At the same time, the voice of his subordinate from just a few moments ago,

『A travelling——』

Flashed back in his mind.

『*Suitcase*.』

The leader shouted,

"Everyone! Shoot the *suitcase*!"

As if responding to the order——

The *suitcase* began shooting.

One of the four men saw.

A *suitcase*, which lay about 4 *metres* away from him, suddenly springing human legs. And the flame of a gun discharging the moment the cover opened.

That was the last scene that guy saw in SJ.

He, of course, did not see the 5.7 *mm* bullets flying at his face.

*　*　*

About 10 minutes ago.

"Alright. First, we need to look for something LLENN's body can fit in."

M said to LLENN in the house that they hid in.

"Come again?"

Not understanding the meaning of M's words at all, LLENN asked again.

And then, M slowly explained his plan.

The plan was to first prepare a container, no matter what it was, so small that it would give the impression „There couldn't possibly be a person inside".

Then, they would cast LLENN's *avatar*, which could be said to be the smallest in GGO, inside.

They would then leave it in the middle of an intersection in the residential area with a good view, and draw out enemies using the next *scan*.

When the enemy, certain to be the *pro* group, comes, she would remain still inside.

"After that, you jump out and fire. I've heard from Pito that LLENN is skilled at ambushes and short-range shooting."

"W-well, I did do that many times over, but…… what if I'm seen through? For example, they think „That cardboard looks fishy" and open fire at me?"

"Then that's the end. Let's pray for the best."

"Dah-!"

LLENN looked up to the sky.

'He can't be serious! I'm being a decoy again!'

LLENN returned a glance at M.

"Let's give it a shot!"

By searching the house, they found the appropriate tool in the blink of an eye. There were *plastic suitcases* of various sizes in the bedroom.

There were clothes scattered about inside and around it, indeed giving a feeling of „Desperately gathering their luggage to escape the war".

Then where had the people, who left those behind and disappeared, gone? They didn't know.

M took out all the contents of a small *suitcase*, and extended his rough hand to LLENN.

"Give me your *knife*."

"Huh?

"I lent you one, didn't I?"

"Ah! ……That's right."

LLENN pulled the *combat knife* out from behind her waist.

As she thought that she'd never need to use it in the first place, she had completely forgotten about its existence, but it was quite useful here. 'It's like foreshadowing in a story', with this thought, LLENN handed the knife over with its *grip* facing M.

M used the *knife* to cut out the two compartments inside the *suitcase*. The *knife* appeared to be quite sharp.

"Alright, you should be able to get in."

"Wha! That's impossible!"

'No matter what, I'm not that small. Use that big one.'

With this thought and while hugging her P90, she attempted to get inside to prove that she was right, and...

"You see."

"……"

The cover easily closed and *locked*.

"I really am tiny, huh……"

She unintentionally let out those words in a happy tone.

M took LLENN out of the *suitcase*, then used the *knife* to cut out one of its sides this time.

"With this, you can stick your legs out and „undress" right away. When the time comes, you'll be able to move a bit."

"Though I won't be able to see what's ahead of me……"

And so, speaking of the *lock*,

"Step away."

He drew his HK45 from his right thigh, brought the muzzle next to it——*bam bam*. He fired two bullets and destroyed it.

In this SJ, this *team*'s first shots were used to destroy a *lock*.

With this, if LLENN raised her body a little while inside, the top of the *suitcase* should open.

"What do we do, M-san. Should we move out right now? What do we do about the location?"

At LLENN's question, M shook his head.

"It's fine if we do it at the last moment. Before that, give me some time to look at the map."

"This place is good; the view here is the best."

Got in the *suitcase* at M's indicated location at abound 14:36. The chosen place was the intersection of a broad street.

And so, the long yet short 4 minutes passed,

"The *scan* is about to begin. Prepare so that you can come out whenever I give you the signal to do so."

M's voice reached LLENN's ears.

"……"

Answering in silence, LLENN once again confirmed her P90's safety with her fingertips.

"The scan has started."

M's voice reached her ears.

LLENN did not know where M was. She wanted to believe that he went to a place suitable for sniping to *support* her.

"I got it. A group is close. About 80 *metres* to the south."

"……"

She almost let her voice out. She did want them to come soon, but 80 *metres* was like being right next to each other in the world of GGO.

"They should be coming closer. Wait for my signal."

"I see them. As I expected, four of them are gathered. It's those guys."

"……"

And so, several tens of seconds, or a minute, or two - she didn't know exactly how much time had passed, slower than ever before——

"LLENN. There's one about 5 *metres* in front of you if you open the cover. Start by sending that guy to hell. Whenever you're ready."

'Uwaa!'

LLENN let out a loud shout in her mind, stuck her legs out from the bottom of the *suitcase*, and opened the cover.

And saw the outside world that she hadn't seen in awhile.

Thanks to GGO's red sky, her eyes did not need to adapt to the dazzling light, and thus LLENN saw a masked man holding a FAL right before her eyes, as M indicated.

Almost at the same time as the *Bullet Circle* overlapping the man's face, LLENN pulled the trigger of her P90.

She shot for about 1 second, but in that time, 15 bullets were unleashed, and most of them were absorbed by the man's mask.

Having completely stood up and dropped the *suitcase* to the ground, LLENN acquired freedom of action.

At the same time, M's voice reached her ears.

"The next one is forty-five degrees to the right, 7 *metres* away."

Feet springing from the *suitcase*, fire came out of it, and a comrade was shot,

"Whaaaa?"

And, moreover, a very small *pink* person came out from it——

Even though the three people had remarkable skills, their reaction was slowed a little at this rather unrealistic scene.

However, they also heard the words of their *leader*, so the mystery became entirely clear. And they understood the action that they should take.

'That guy is an enemy. He got one of us, but we just have to bring him down with the three of us.'

"Te!"

As the three men shouted the same thing, they aimed the muzzle of the FALs towards LLENN and pulled the trigger. And their fired bullets all passed through the air without hitting anyone.

"WHAT!"

One of the masked guys shouted while he was shooting.

The opponent that he was shooting at, thinking that the opponent wouldn't be able to slip away, had quickly dodged their line of fire and was coming towards him. At an extremely high *speed*.

The *pink* right arm projected a *pink* gun.

It was as if she wanted to stab him to death with the gun. LLENN continued charging towards him mercilessly with a full-speed *dash* while dodging the *Bullet Lines*, in other words, the bullets themselves, of her opponents to the lower left.

"To-o-o!"

Along with a yell, she began pounding away with her P90.

This time, several shots hit the man's neck and face, along with the sound of consecutive, dry sounds.

It was a vital area, thus the *damage* was enough for instant death. His full *hit points* instantly decreased. Eventually, it completely ran out. Facing the man, who had bent backwards and stopped shooting, LLENN continued her assault and pulled the emergency *brake* next to his body.

"If possible, use an enemy's corpse as a shield. In the BoB and SJ, unlike in normal situations, the corpses remain on the spot. And, they become ≪indestructible *objects*≫."

That's what M had taught her some time ago.

LLENN fell to the ground in front of the man who collapsed with a thud. She assumed a prone posture.

The remaining two men were on the opposite side of the street, 10 *metres* away, and aimed their FALs at LLENN, but...

"Shit!"

One of them hesitated to fire. Assuming his comrade hadn't died yet, his fire would probably finish the guy off. Although he understood in his mind that this was a *game*, so he didn't have to worry about that, he just couldn't do it.

"Shit!"

The other one fired, cursing in the same way. 'That guy is already done for', he understood.

However, although his bullets hit his comrade's corpse and the ground, he didn't land a single hit on the small, *pink* body lying below the corpse.

As his comrade's corpse became an indestructible object, the body became the same as a thick wall. Moreover, only the P90 muzzle and one eye peeked out from there.

"Too tiny!"

The bullet that LLENN fired hit the man's right flank as he shouted while shooting. A hit *effect* ran from his right flank to his shoulder[36], and his body was knocked over with his face looking up. The finishing blow was fired to the collapsed man's head in *full auto* rapid-fire.

[36] The original text is 逆袈裟斬り (lit. reverse kesagiri). A kesagiri is a diagonal slash from the shoulder.

"Why you…!"

The last survivor charged towards LLENN, while vehemently shooting in rapid-fire, to improve his accuracy rate.

The next moment, he saw a small, *pink* mass rolling out of the side of his comrades corpse at an extreme speed. 'Is that a spinning-top rolling out?', he thought.

Only when it suddenly stopped did he realise that it was a person, but, at the next moment, *Bullet Lines* shone all over his face.

"Hahaha!"

The man smiled under his mask, but LLENN probably did not see it.

Their *leader* saw the whole thing with his binoculars

How the *suitcase* grew pink legs, then a child sprung out of it and began shooting and taking down his four subordinates.

He even confirmed it in the *status* window in the upper-left corner of his vision. All four of them... were killed in action.

Looking at the time, it probably didn't even take 10 seconds. The gunshots of the FAL and P90 resounding disorderly reached his ears.

The *leader* put away the binoculars, and told the man peeking through the *scope* of his sniper rifle next to him,

"Yeah, you don't need to shoot. ——Play time is over."

"Is it the right time?"

The man responded honestly and put down his M24. At the same, with

a quick and natural move, he activated the safety at the side of the *bolt handle*.

In their field of vision, the small, *pink* person began running at an extreme speed, immediately hid inside a house and disappeared.

"That's not the agility of a human. We can't use it as a reference."

While saying those words without shock or admiration, the *leader* called out a *window* and operated it.

"Surrender. Are you sure you want to proceed?"

At that question, he pressed the „Ｙｅｓ" button to answer.

"M-san M-san! Is there anyone chasing me?"

While running through the street at full-speed and exchanging her magazine with 3 bullets remaining, LLENN asked.

"No, no one. I can see it from here; it seems that the remaining two gave up on the idea of continuing and resigned."

"Whaa!"

Surprised, LLENN stopped moving, turned around and looked at the slaughter scene that she caused.

About 100 *metres* in that direction, four collapsed figures and four flashy and red 【Ｄｅａｄ】 *markers* could be seen.

"Then, we—— a-against that team, w-w-w-we won?"

"„Didn't lose" would probably be the correct expression, but yeah, that's right. Nice job."

Hearing M's words,

"U…… Uuu……"

After several seconds, LLENN gave a full smile.

"We did iiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiit!"

She thrusted her left hand and the P90 in her right hand into the air, and loudly exclaimed right in the middle of the housing district ruins.

The tournament was not over yet.

At any rate, the first thing that LLENN should do was to regroup with M.

"M-san, where are you?"

A voice responded to LLENN's question.

"I'm keeping an eye on the *area* while moving to the west."

"I would like to regroup until the *scan*, but what do you think we should do?"

While asking, LLENN had an idea. 'Wait, isn't regrouping a bad move?'

M probably knew LLENN's position. Since he had only moved about 100 *metres* to the north from the place where he left the *suitcase*.

'But, where is M?'

'In this residential area the scenery looks all the same and, moreover, it's a place that we've visited for the first time, so does M really know my

whereabouts?'

If this was an urban area, they could say „Let's meet up in front of a *building* that looks like this".

But, LLENN hesitated to ask such a thing.

"I'll guide you, so don't worry. First, advance to the west from your current position in a half-run. If you see the sun to the upper-left of field of vision, then you're going the right way."

That was the answer that came.

It seemed that there was nothing to worry about at all. M was also being vigilant and would probably be in an easy-to-find place. Perhaps it was fine to just advance straight along the road.

"Roger."

LLENN said in a light tone and followed the first instruction.

She thought that it would be easy to meet up, but it didn't take long for her to realise how horribly mistaken she was. Because, M's instructions were complicated and mysterious.

"Stop there. You should see a burned down *rack* on your left. Turn there and advance slowly. First narrow road on the right."

Or,

"You've come to a flooded area. Take the lane forty-five degrees to your left. It's very shallow, so you'll be able to pass. Advance straight ahead until you reach another broad street."

Or,

"The alley to your left. Walk normally, carefully counting to 20. There will be an *apartment*, with the lower half of its *door* missing. Enter it. The inside is a mess, but you'll be able to pass. Advance through the corridor, and go out to the garden from the fifth room on your left side."

The *level* of the complexity was so high that LLENN began to suspect: 'With this detail, is he looking at me? Or is sneakily following me from behind?'

After who knows how many times she turned, advanced, then turned again, she completely lost track of where she was.

"M-san…… Is this really okay? Do you know where I am? Should we wait for the next *satelite scan*?"

Her wristwatch displayed 14:17. The next scan will take place after 3 minutes.

During a *scan*, the *leader*'s position would be displayed. Though, of course, if M wasn't aware of his own exact whereabouts, then even that wouldn't be of any use.

"No need to worry about that. Enter the large house in front of you. That's where I am."

"Oh?"

In front of LLENN was a waterfront mansion. The road ended here, as it was completely flooded beyond this point. She would not be able to advance further even if he told her to.

The calm water, which reflected the red sky and surrounded the house like an island, had an ominous serenity and beauty. Looking into the distance, she could see some sort of large structure in the red and hazy scenery. The swamp was quite close, so that were probably the contours

of the spaceship that was sticking out of the ground.

At the next moment, something shone brightly next to the contours of the spaceship. It disappeared immediately, so it seemed to be the explosion of a *plasma grenade*.

While assessing that someone must be fighting there, LLENN entered the house through the entranceway, and found the familiar giant figure in the centre of the gorgeous *living* room.

The moment she saw him, *boom*, the sound of the explosion a few moments ago resounded, as if it was a sound effect for finding M.

“Wow! How? Why? By what means?”

LLENN rounded her eyes and asked, and M asked in return.

“What is?”

“Your instructions to get here! How did you manage to guide me through that maze-like *route*? Could it be that you were looking from above using a „secret tool“ that I don’t know about?”

She had heard from Pitohui some time ago. About a rumour that an item called a ≪ unmanned reconnaissance plane≫ was added, or would soon be added to GGO, a game which constantly gets new *maps*, *monsters*, guns and equipment.

That was a small, *radio controlled* aircraft or *helicopter*, which could fly in the sky and send video footage to the user. If such a thing existed, it would be overwhelmingly advantageous in battle and the *balance* of the *game* would collapse, thus there were people who dismissed it as an unfounded rumour.

If it existed, that would explain M’s guidance.

Could that be what was in that large *backpack*? In that case, the extreme absurdity of coming to SJ with just the two of them would make sense as well.

M's answer was,

"Like a *drone*? No, that's not it. That Pito wanted one though."

He completely dismissed that idea.

"Then how? Could it be that you are using some sort of…… *cheat*?"

A *cheat* was any kind of „dishonest deed" in a game. In this case, it could, for example, be tampering with the *system* to display one's whereabouts on the map or something.

Of course, if the management side found out about such a deed, it was likely that their accounts would be suspended, not to mention being disqualified from SJ, thus LLENN felt scared as she asked.

"It's my personal *player skill*. Well, some people think of it as a *cheat* though.

M dismissed this idea as well. Not comprehending what he had said, LLENN asked,

"Which means?"

"Ever since childhood, I've excelled at geographical perception. No matter whether the *real* world or a VR *game*, I've never „got lost". For example, no matter how long I walk underground, I can tell where east, west, south and north is, as well as the distance I've travelled. I almost perfectly memorise places that I've been in. And even if I've never been to a place, if I look at the map, I can draw the scenery in my head."

"That's amazing!"

LLENN admired honestly.

Like any ordinary girl in society, reading maps definitely wasn't LLENN's forte. Though it became a necessary skill to play GGO, so she trained it quite well by looking as *field maps*.

And she remembered. Something that she had once read in a book. That humans can have an „absolute geographical perception", just like they can have an „absolute pitch"[37]. It's said that such people are capable of telling where they arrived to even if they were taken there by car blindfolded and with their ears plugged.

"I see! I get it!"

LLENN raised her voice.

"The M in M-san is the first letter of „*map*" or „*mapper*", right!"

"……Wha? Eh——, well……, something like that……"

M's rough face expressed bewilderment, but LLENN continued without minding it.

"That's more than confirmed. That is so cool!"

"Is…… is that so?"

"Yes it is. All I could come up with was to modify my real name, you know?"

"You'd better avoid saying such things. You'll expose your *RL* details."

"Oops…… You didn't hear anything! It's nothing like my real name,

[37] Absolute pitch (AP), widely referred to as perfect pitch, is a rare auditory phenomenon characterized by the ability of a person to identify or re-create a given musical note without the benefit of a reference tone.

okay?"

"Leaving that aside, it's about time."

Just as M said that, LLENN's wristwatch began vibrating. It seemed that M also excelled in telling the time.

14:50. The fifth *scan* began.

LLENN did not know the result of the previous *scan*, thus she attentively stared at this one.

This time, it was a very quick *scan*. Having begun from the east, it crossed the map in the blink of an eye, and the dots rapidly lit up.

However, the majority of them were gray - the position of annihilated or resigned teams.

"That's a surprise…… M-san, there's but three *teams* left!"

The vivid dots that denoted *teams* that were still fighting numbered merely three.

Located in the central residential area, specifically, its west side, was, of course, them. LLENN finally understood her location.

There was a dot shining in the desert-wilderness *area*, at the bottom boundary of the map. They were probably 5 *km* or more away from LLENN's group.

It was nice that they could ignore them for the time being, but she did not understand their reason for moving to such a location. Were they trying escape from the *battle royale*?

The last one, who would certainly become their next opponents, was really close. They were in the swamp.

In the vicinity, a grey dot could be seen at the crashed spaceship, so did they splendidly take down an ambushing *team*? Of course, there was the possibility that it was the opposite case.

They were roughly 4 *km* away from LLENN's group in a straight line.

Be that as it may, there was a swamp there, and furthermore, if they wanted to come to LLENN's groups current position, an approximately 2 *km*-width submerged area that turned into a lake would stand in their way. It would be necessary to take a detour from the top or bottom, thus wouldn't they not be able to make it in the next 10 minutes?

The *scan* was instantly over, and LLENN looked up to M's face.

"Our next opponent is the *team* in the swamp, right. I think we should be able to use the same plan for the next scan at 15 o'clock, right?"

They had a success just now, thus LLENN was considerably proactive. She was excited, and her words were energetic.

Although she, no, they were under absurd heavy fire from *machine guns* in the beginning, it was amazing that that they managed to become one of the *last* three *teams* standing. And furthermore, they could even aim further, so it wasn't surprising that she was excited. Even now they would definitely get a „steel *medal*", but while they were at it, they could aim for silver and then gold.

"Even if we were to use the same plan, this place isn't suitable, right? We have to move more to the north or south, right. And we need to make the enemy in the swamp come to us. Let's use the 15 o'clock scan to lure them!"

"An hour, huh……"

"Hm? M-san?"

"……"

'At any rate, the situation is weird, huh', LLENN thought. Not answering a question wasn't like M.

'Could it be that he lost interest in the *game* after close to an hour?"

Was LLENN's impression, but she felt uncomfortable asking that directly. Having lost interest in looking at his face from the side while he was pondering, she began surveying the gorgeous room.

After spending several tens of seconds in silence, at last,

"For the time being, let's get out of here and advance to the south-west along the waterfront. We won't be able to prepare a *trap* before the 15 o'clock *scan*. Let's consider our next move and look for a new place."

"Roger!"

LLENN answered with a smile, and added a mock salute. And then,

"Fū fū fun, fufu fūn, fufu fun fun, fū fū fū"

She walked while humming a tune. It was the tune of a 『*Promenade*』 from Mussorgsky's 『Pictures at an Exhibition』[38].

It was considerably famous in the field of *classical* music, and it was also a tune that Kanzaki Elza would sing alongside a poem in Japanese.

M's large figure slowly followed her from behind.

Having come out of the mansion, the two proceeded towards the south-west while looking at the submerged region on the right.

[38] Probably referring to the beginning of this one.

The number of houses gradually decreased, until they eventually saw a large lake. There was no wind, so there were no waves either, thus the surface of the lake looked like a mirror.

The sky was red as always, thus the lake also looked red; it was both ominous and pretty. In the distance, they faintly saw the spaceship that was sticking out of the ground.

LLENN took the vanguard and ran while occasionally looking back. She felt really good, thus she was afraid that she was likely to leave M behind.

And then, when less than 2 minutes had passed since they left the house; at 14:54——

"Enemy! On the right!"

LLENN heard M's sharp voice.

Chapter 9 – M's Battle

"Enemy! On the right!"

The first thing that LLENN thought when she heard that was,

'Aren't you mistaken?'

That.

Indeed, an enemy *team* had survived in the swamp. They confirmed that 4 minutes ago.

However, they were 4 *km* away in a straight line. Moreover, there was a lake between their current position and the swamp.

If they were on a flat land that was suitable for running and had *characters* that had raised their agility to extreme levels, they would have to be running at a no longer human speed of 60 *km* per hour in a straight line; such a thing had to be considered.

'That's impossible, you must be mistaken', LLENN tried to say as she stopped and looked to her right,

"Wha?"

Discovering that she was wrong herself.

Above the lake, something that she did not see until this moment could be seen.

They were black dots. Three, no, four black dots were floating on the surface of the red lake, and moreover, they were rapidly becoming bigger.

"Drop to the ground!"

Just as she lay down as M told her, several vivid *Bullet Lines* passed above her head.

There was no doubt about it anymore. Those black dots were an enemy, and they were targeting LLENN's group with their guns.

She heard the sound of several bullets from those guns flying above her head; a sound that she had heard far too much shortly after the *game* started.

"What's going on? M-san?"

While on the ground and pressing her head to the *asphalt*, LLENN asked. M, whose posture she couldn't see, answered.

"The enemy has obtained a convenient vehicle. That's all there is to it."

"A vehicle?"

"Yeah, they'll be coming considerably close to us, so you should see it."

"……"

LLENN slowly raised her head, and looked at the lake once again. The four black dots had decreased the gap by about 300 *metres*, and although they were still small,

"Aah…… I get it."

She realised what that shape was. Small *motorboats*. And there were people riding it. In that case, it wasn't strange that they closed this distance, travelling at 60 *km* per hour on the surface of the water.

"Those are *motorboats*! That's cheating!"

"It's not really cheating. Players are free to use vehicles within the *field*. First come first serve."

"Uu……"

"Moreover, to be accurate, those aren't *motorboats*."

"Wha? Then what are they?"

"They're *hovercrafts*."

"Wha?"

"Roll to the left to get away!"

Before LLENN could process that, she rolled horizontally from her

prone posture. Due to her extreme quick-wittedness, she rolled twenty times in the blink of an eye, moving several tens of *metres* away from her former position, and although she felt considerably dizzy, that action saved her.

Weren't those red *Bullet Lines* that came flying at the place that she had been just a moment ago, the ground being showered in a hail of bullets right afterwards?

They were under fire from *machine guns*. LLENN had been under considerable fire some time ago, thus she immediately understood what was attacking them now.

The bullets were scattered, but if she hadn't rolled away, it was quite possible that at least one of them would have hit her. If the bullet had hit a vital part of the body, it would obviously result in instant death.

"Shhit."

LLENN, whose *pink* combat uniform was stained with grass and dust, raised her head, and saw that one *hovercraft* was merely 100 *metres* away, and traversing the lake from left to right at high speed.

She clearly saw it in detail. Its overall length was about 3 *metres*. At a glance, it looked like a *jet ski*, in other words, a water scooter.

However, unlike a *jet ski*, it had black rubber under its green hull, and an aeroplane-like large *propeller* in its rear.

Its hull floating by jetting air below it, and moving with the help of its *propellers*; that is what a vehicle called a *hovercraft* is. A high-pitched *engine* noise, with the *būn* noise of the *propellers* mixed in, could be heard.

There were two men riding it in a row. The man sitting in front grasped a horizontal *handle*, and the man in the back had his *machine gun* placed

sideways on the side of the vessel.

LLENN pointed her P90 at them, wondering if she should return fire, but before she could put her finger on the trigger, in other words, before the *Bullet Circle* appeared in her field of vision, she stopped.

She didn't feel that she could hit the *hovercraft* that was zigzagging away from them. It would be a waste of bullets.

The other three vehicles were still far away, thus it seemed that only one of them charged in for a flank attack.

"M-san, you okay?"

"Yeah. I didn't get hit."

Hearing the answer, she sighed in relief for now. M should be about 50 *metres* behind her, but she couldn't see well from her prone posture.

The vehicle that came attacking returned to the company of their comrades. Right now, all four vehicles approximately 300 *metres* in front of them continued zigzagging in order not to get shot.

"W-what do we do? Since we got discovered, we can't use the *trap* during the next *scan* if we don't get away."

"Yeah."

"Let's run to the back! Into the housing district!"

"We can't. They'll chase after us."

"How? We'll be on shore after all, right?"

"A *hovercraft* is an amphibious vehicle that can travel on flat ground. It can chase after us even on the road. Especially in this area, where the

lake turns into a highway, making it an ideal location for them to come ashore."

"Wha that's cheating!"

LLENN was seriously angry, but that was just the sort of vehicle it was, so she couldn't do anything about it.

"If we turn our backs to them and escape, they'll accelerate and come straight towards us at once. And then, if they close the distance, it's the end for us. They've probably realised that our group consists of but two people. Those guys are also a considerably skilled *team*."

Even at a time like this, M's calm voice was reassuring. However, this didn't change the fact that they were still in a *pinch*.

"Then, what should we…… Should I become a decoy and run around while, you, M-san, hide? If I'm alone, I'm considerably fast, you know? Of course, not as fast as a machine though……"

"That's a nice idea."

"I—— I know, right?"

Feeling that her suggestion was praised for the first time, LLENN felt a bit happy, despite the current situation.

"But, I'm not running away, I'm going to shoot them from here."

"Say what? ——M'san, you shouldn't fall into despair, you know?"

LLENN said in a tone as if she was admonishing a person who was attempting suicide.

"Who is in despair. Do I look like I am? Right now, the enemy is far away. Try raising your head a bit."

"Hm?"

LLENN first lightly raised her head.

No *Bullet Lines* could be seen in the surroundings, thus, for the time being it didn't seem like she would be shot in the next moment. She was scared, worrying that there could be a *sniper* on the other side, but it should be a next to impossible task for a sniper to shoot her from atop a moving *hovercraft*. She couldn't shoot them, but they couldn't shoot her either.

Since this was the case, LLENN raised the upper half of her body. She turned her eyes at the direction she expected M to be and——

There he was. She saw a large body lying on the *asphalt* road that was by the side of the lake. And, she saw his M14 EBR set up on the *bipod* in front of him.

'Huh? Something's different?'

LLENN looked for what was wrong, and noticed it. His giant *backpack* was not on his back, as if it had run away under the cover of the night or had relocated. M had unfastened it, placed it in front of his body, and was now trying to open it. And he opened it.

"I'm going to use this."

While saying that, M thrust his hands into the *backpack*.

"S-some sort of amazing weapon?"

LLENN's voice was filled with expectation.

'Is the mysterious „secret tool" inside it finally going to be revealed? Is it a an anti-tank *rocket* with powerful destructive force, or a *grenade*

launcher that can fire *grenades* approximately 200 metres away?

With these thoughts, she believed that it would be an expensive, *rare*, and high-power weapon. One that was probably capable of turning the tables with a single attack in this inconvenient situation.

But M's answer was,

"No, a protector."

"Say what? A protector?"

"Look."

What M took out was an object with large, iron plates lying on top of each other.

Its height was about 50 *cm*. Its width was probably about 30 *cm*. Dyed in green, it was an approximately 1 *cm*-thick plate. And there were about eight of them stacked up. They looked like tiles stacked up for a karate practitioner to break.

M took it and,

"Humph"

Along with a grunt, he extended it to the left and right with his hands. If M needed to shout, just how much strength was needed to extend it?

And so, after being extended, it became a 50 *cm*-high, about 240 *cm*-long in an arc, fan-shaped wall.

"What is that? M san what is that?"

"For a *chicken* like me, an overly *chicken* protector."

While answering, M inserted his M14 EBR into the gap at the centre.

And so, the final form of it was like the emplacement of a tank's gun turret, that hid M's body from the front, with only the gun barrel sticking out from the centre.

"LLENN. One of them is coming again."

"Wha!"

LLENN returned her vision to the lake. One of the vehicles among the four were charging from the right side, in other words, towards M, in a zigzagging manner.

"Am I the target now? Fine by me, look."

Just as he said, LLENN lied down, turned her face to the right, and she saw it.

On the right side of her own field of vision, one *hovercraft* was charging towards him, and finally turned the rudder horizontally towards the lake shore. A *turn*, which made its rear skid, characteristic of a *hovercraft* that would be called *drifting* in car terms.

The moment the port side faced the shore—— the man in the back, who was holding a German-made ≪H&K HK21≫, opened fired with his 7.62 *mm machine gun*. 100 *meters* away from M.

LLENN couldn't see the *Bullet Lines* aimed at M, but she did saw the bullets flying towards him this time. They were tracers. This *machine gun* guy seems to have increased the ratio of his tracers, and the several horizontal lines of light made by the afterimage were aimed exactly towards where M lay——

"Wha?"

And they soared up into the sky.

They were deflected.

LLENN clearly saw it. How the fan-shaped shield erected in front of M deflected the bullets that were flying towards him into the sky. Several additional bullets hit it, but they all disappeared into the sky. Some of them hit M's surroundings, scraping the *asphalt* and scattering the grass.

LLENN could hear the metallic sound of bullets hitting the shield much better than she could hear the gunshots from the *machine gun* 100 *metres* away.

"LLENN, fire at the guys with your P90 as they escape. You don't have to hit them, just unleash all 50 of your bullets."

"Ro-roger!"

The fact that she could hear M's voice meant that he was safe, thus

"Alright!"

LLENN firmly pressed her P90 horizontally atop her left shoulder, and pointed her muzzle at the *hovercraft*, whose rudder was turned to the right to escape to the open sea.

As she touched the trigger, she waited for the appearance of the *Bullet Circle* that was late by a beat. She didn't measure the time, but it probably took about 0.5 seconds. A large circle appeared in her field of vision, she then confirmed that the *hovercraft* was mostly within it and squeezed the trigger at once.

Baaaaaaaaaaa, went the *full auto* rapid-fire that sounded like barrage of a small drum.

Small, golden empty shells were ejected to the right.

A P90 would violently eject empty shells directly below it, but with LLENN's super short body shooting from a prone posture, there was barely any space below it, thus there was the possibility that ejection of a large quantity of empty shells would be delayed. Thus, shooting with the gun horizontally was one of the special *techniques* for her that she was taught by Pitohui.

Small bullets[39] went flying towards the *hovercraft* that was about 150 *metres* away but—— they scattered in a large area as expected.

Long and narrow pillars of water were made in the surroundings of the escaping *hovercraft*; a bullet hitting one of the men and causing instant death, much less a bullet hitting the *gasoline tank* and causing a big explosion - such lucky events did not occur.

'Well, I'm just creating a diversion, so it's not a problem.' LLENN, who discharged an entire *magazine* of 50 bullets, took out a new *magazine* from her thigh *pouch* and, while reloading,

"M-san, that shield is amazing! You were carrying such a thing on your back…… You don't get hurt even if they shoot at you like that?"

"For weapons of up to 7.62 *mm class*, it'll deflect their bullets if I'm shot from the front."

"Wha that's amazing!"

LLENN admired.

Some time ago, she was taught about piercing power by Pitohui in detail.

[39] The word used here is 弾頭 (dantou), which usually refers to a warhead, but may also refer to the projectile propelled by a firearm. Unfortunately, in gun terminology, that part is called a "bullet", while colloquially the word "bullet" may be used to refer to the whole cartridge/shell rather than just the actual bullet. The Japanese word 弾丸 (dangan) is equally ambiguous.

"If you pick a careless place to hide, you will be shot. You have to be careful"

She received such a *lecture*.

For example, grass and the like can be used to hide oneself from enemy's eyes, but it won't protect against enemy bullets. Since bullets can easily penetrate such cover.

The piercing power of a *rifle's* bullet far surpasses the imagination of a person not well versed in guns. With 5.56 *mm* and above class *rifle* bullets being mainstream in GGO, a cover might look sturdy at a glance, but it would still be penetrated. For example, if concrete-*block* walls are shot, after 1 or 2 shots, it would be destroyed, thus it's a very useless *item* to hide behind.

The walls of wooden houses are also weak, thus it is impossible to be safe from gunfire inside. The *door* of an automobile would fall out after a bit as well.

"The only areas of a car that can provide safety are the back of the *engine block*, and the back of the *wheel*. Everything else can't be used for hiding."

Those were Pitohui's lessons.

"How the heck can it do that?"

Returning her gaze frontward, LLENN asked. Right now, the four vehicles were regrouping.

"It doesn't exist in *RL*, but it seems that they are armoured plates from a space battleship. The strongest material in GGO, or so I've heard. Special[40] material stores sell them at an extremely high price."

[40] The actual word used here is アングル (angle).

'Then I should avoid asking about the price of eight of those.'

LLENN thought. If she asked, she would probably end up seeing 10,000 yen notes plastered all over it.

"The shield has displayed its power. Thus, those guys are probably going to attack all together. While the *machine gun* guy provides a diversion, the rest will try to muscle their way through."

"Uge? Will you be alright?"

"I'll tell you the plan—— LLENN, I want you to stand up and run around in all directions. At full-speed. If you see *Bullet Lines* coming towards you, immediately drop to the ground and roll, and run from place to place. Like before, you can shoot at them as a diversion."

'The decoy role again!'

Rather than feeling angry, she actually felt excited.

"Meanwhile, M-san, you're going to snipe from there?"

"Yeah."

Hearing that answer, LLENN,

"But but, won't it be a disadvantage for you if your *Bullet Lines* appear?"

This time, she asked not in concern for herself, but M instead.

Right now, with both parties having seen each other and knowing each other's position, *Bullet Lines* would definitely appear before he fired.

Like the *Bullet Circle*, they appear right after the attacker puts pressure on the trigger with their finger. Since the opponent would know that he was being targeted when M fires,

"Wouldn't he avoid them by suddenly turning the *hovercraft*'s rudder?"

"That's right."

"Then why——"

"Let's talk later. I'll do my best in my own way. They're coming. Run from place to place."

"Uhya!"

LLENN also confirmed it. Four *hovercrafts* began moving all at once, spread out widely across the lake, and came towards them in zigzags.

The *Bullet Lines* extending from there that began to dance wildly in the air, like the *laser* beams of a *live* concert.

"Oh enough of this!"

M did tell her to run around from place to place, in other words, draw the enemy fire, thus

"Let's get'em!"

LLENN stood up forcefully. Her high-agility *character* began to *dash* at full power.

* * *

The team that obtained the *hovercrafts*——

Consisted of high-*level players* that have been playing GGO for a considerable amount of time. Their *leader* was so skilled that he participated in the main tournament of the third BoB. Unfortunately, he was shot by someone more skilled in the early stages.

The six members were all men. Their weapon lineup consisted of a HK21, 7.62 *mm machine gun* as their principal weapon——

Along with two ≪H&K G36K≫, one ≪*Steyr* STM-556≫, one ≪FN *Herstal* SCAR-L≫ and one ≪*Beretta* ARX160≫ 5.56 *mm assault rifles*.

All of them were European-made, high-power guns; a considerably powerful lineup.

Furthermore, in order to be able to share *magazines* among the *assault rifle* force, the two G36K users were using *adapters*. Because of this, the five of them could use the same *magazine*.

Although their camouflage and equipment *belts* were all different due to personal taste, they had only two common features as a *team*.

The first was, a *team emblem* sewn on everyone's arms. A skull, holding a *knife* horizontally in its mouth, *mark*[41] in inconspicuous black, navy blue and dark grey colours was depicted on it.

The other was that they had all equipped *magazine pouches* on the back of their *vest*. Their hands obviously could not reach them, thus they were meant for their comrades standing behind them.

In case they had to fight indoors and were close to their allies, drawing out magazines from the back of the person in front of them would be faster than from their own bodies; which was the reason they were equipped.

So far, they've been *stoically* pursuing *team play*, thus they had a streak of easy victories in SJ's first half. Having begun SJ in the north-westernmost tip of the *field*, in the prairie, they took down several *teams* in their surroundings.

[41] ドクロのマーク (dokuro no mark) literally means "mark of skull" or "skull mark" and refers to the skull and crossbones symbol. The formal name for the symbol is actually 髑髏と骨 (dokuro to hone; skull and bones), but it doesn't seem like it's used that often. But, since the author uses "emblem" in another instance, I figured I'd just leave the literal translation.

As for the two *teams* that took up position in the forest, trying to defeat each other, they had split into two groups and attacked both at the same time, forcing them to leave the tournament.

The problematic case, even to them, was the *team* that had camped in the crashed spaceship in the swamp.

Leaving a lookout at the highest platform of the spaceship, they set up *snipers* facing all four cardinal directions on the spaceship, and easily brought down *teams* that came along the few *routes* in the swamp that could possibly be traversed.

Cowardice is cowardice, but strategy is strategy. They were probably lucky, having started SJ in such an advantageous position from the beginning.

Just as they considered giving up on attacking them, and to advance toward the centre, while ignoring them, they chanced upon *hovercrafts* next to a shed before the swamp. They had searched for vehicles there right after SJ started, but, at the time, they could not find anything of the sort.

Although strange, this was a *game*. They deduced that, as the number of remaining *teams* decreased, a way to travel became necessary to make contact with other teams, thus these vehicles appeared. And so, with them, they decided to attack the spaceship *team*.

As they have had practice driving vehicles in GGO, with just a bit of practise, they managed to handle their new vehicles, and made use of their new speed to quickly traverse the swamp.

It was difficult to hit a *hovercraft* travelling at high speed, and due to *Bullet Lines*, it was possible to avoid the snipers' line of fire. After infiltrating the spaceship, they ended up in close quarter combat on board the confined ship.

Spreading out their forces to control all four cardinal directions was the cause of the spaceship *team's* defeat. They were defeated one by one on board the confined ship, until finally, only the *leader* at the highest platform was left.

"Gentlemen! It seems that you have defeated all of my comrades! Splendid work! I probably have no chance of winning anymore! HOWEVER! I am NOT going to resign! I am not going to let you kill me either! I'll show you! THIS, is how you lose a battle!"

The *leader* gave a speech in high spirits, distributed all the *plasma grenades* she had throughout her body, and pressed the activation *button* of one of them,

"Uooooooooooooooo!"

And jumped down.

A flashy, bluish-white explosion was created in the air, the explosion induced by other *grenades* spread out, and its inside shined, with red *polygon* fragments mixed in; my my, that was really beautiful,

"Taamayaa……"[42]

One of the attackers muttered unintentionally.

Corpses being left behind was a feature in the BoB and SJ, but, unsure of how it would work in this case, when the body is blasted into very small pieces, they looked at the sky where the explosion occurred, and saw that the scattered red *polygon* fragments gathering soundlessly.

And then, the created corpse, with a 【Ｄｅａｄ】*marker* attached, suddenly began to fall down, as if it just remembered to do so. *Bozun*, it fell into the swamp and sunk, disappearing from sight.

[42] Explained here.

"How *surreal*……"

Another member of the group muttered unintentionally.

They then checked the 14:50 *satellite scan* that began immediately afterwards. Finally, the surviving teams numbered three, and the group *accelerated* their *hovercrafts* to attack the closest team, which was in the residential area, in other words, LLENN's group.

They closed the distance in the blink of an eye, and discovered their targets. Finding out that the opponents only had two members remaining (though this was a mistake), they attacked twice with their *machine gun*, and examined the enemy's forces by their reaction. It was a thing called scouting out the enemy's capabilities.

And so, they witnessed M's shield.

"One of them deflected our 7.62 *mm* bullets with a shield expanded into a fan shape. His weapon is unclear, but based on the long and narrow barrel, it appears to be a sniper rifle. The other *pink* one is small and fast. Armed with a P90."

While returning to their *leader's* side where their four comrades were, the *machine gun* man reported.

"It can deflect despite the distance…… wow."

"It's definitely custom-made."

"How I want one. But it's probably expensive."

Mutters from his comrades reached his ears via his communication *item*.

The *leader*, armed with an STM-556, rode on the back of one of the

vehicles and took command.

The remaining three men were operating the *hovercrafts* by grasping the *handle* with their right hand while holding their respective *assault rifles* with just their left hand.

The *leader* glimpsed at his wristwatch. 14:56. He thought for a moment, and instantly decided.

"Let's settle this before the next *scan*! Everyone, prepare for the assault. Watch out for *Bullet Lines* coming from the shield; if you see one, dodge it immediately. We'll land in the blink of an eye, and attack them from behind. Spread out, 10 *metres* front and back, and 20 *metres* in width. Jake's group, since you're the farthest to the right, prepare to provide covering fire."

'Roger', he heard five consecutive answers. Since all of them understood that this plan was the best.

If they endlessly spent their time on the surface of the lake, the battle would never be settled. The *hovercrafts* had a fuel gauge, and the first half had already been depleted. The movement speed of the vehicles was an overwhelming advantage for them. They wanted to defeat the enemies ahead of them already and preserve enough fuel for the last battle that would decide the victor.

In that case, the only action for them to take was to resort to *power play*. By making the best use of their mobility and attacking, they could instantly land. After that, they could make the best use of their numerical advantage and bring down their enemy; that was their plan.

What put them at unease was the sniper behind the shield, but, just like with the attack on the crashed spaceship minutes ago, they should be able to deal with him by moving in *zig-zags* and dodging the *Bullet Lines* one by one.

The *hovercraft* with the HK21 user called Jake passed through behind them and assumed the rightmost position. The moment that they lined up in an almost horizontal line,

"Attack!"

While giving the order, the *leader* tapped the shoulder of the man sitting ahead of him.

The *hovercraft*'s two *stroke gasoline engine* made a high-pitched exhaust sound, and the noise of the propulsion *propeller*'s wind joined in. Setting aside the question of why such an old engine was used despite this being set in the future, the four vehicles began advancing forward, as they sent a thunderous roar throughout the lake.

Spreading out in all directions and turning the rudder to travel in *zig-zags*, the four *hovercrafts* began their assault. The gale made by the *propellers* spewed out four sprays of water on the lake.

At the same time, a small body stood up at the lake shore, and began running to the left.

"Chibi confirmed!"

While shouting this, the ARX160 man riding on the second *hovercraft* to the right tried aiming at LLENN with just his left arm.

The repeatedly contracting *Bullet Circle* entered his field of vision, but it moved wildly due to the vibration of the hovercraft, and because he was holding the gun with one hand. It just couldn't line up with LLENN as she was running nimbly. Even if he shot right now, it would definitely be just a waste of bullets, thus he did not fire.

"Not yet. We'll bring them down after we get closer."

He heard the *leader*'s calm voice. 250 *metres* until shore.

Protected by the fan-shaped shield, M's large build held the M14 EBR. He was in a prone posture. Under his *bush hat*, his right eye peeked through the *scope*.

In his round field of vision was a black crosshair linking the top, bottom, right and left to the centre. It included small, black dots in several places at regular intervals.

The *hovercraft* floating on the surface of the lake was, right now, in the centre of it. Slightly deviating from it.

"200 *metres* remaining. Jake! Begin your diversion fire!"

Upon the *leader*'s giving the command, the man in the *hovercraft* to his right began firing.

"Roger! *Rock 'n' roll*!"

"Uhyaaaa!"

LLENN ran among the *Bullet Lines*.

Red lines that looked like *laser* beams extended soundlessly to her her surroundings. And then, they disappeared at the speed of soar of a bullet. *Byunbyun*, she was wrapped in the roar of bullets.

'There's no way you can easily hit me running at full speed! Because I'm this small! Even if you do hit me, it'll only be a mere coincidence! Your accuracy is awfully low! I'm a *lucky girl*!"

Although that's what she thought, scary things were still scary. If they hit the head, face or spinal cord.

Since this is in-*game*, even if she died, it wouldn't mean that she would actually die. If it was still this scary despite that, then just how dreadful could real wars, where one's *real life* is wagered, be?

'Long live the currently peaceful Japan where war *games* are played instead!' With this thought,

"Uhyaaaaaaaaaaaa!"

LLENN continued running, leaving behind the *Doppler* effect of her scream.

And, for a moment, she had a thought. Whether she should use the P90 that she carried in her arms to *guard* her head and neck. If she did, she would have a 50x20 *cm* rectangle shield. Even if an *unlucky* bullet came, she would avoid instant death if it hit her P90 instead.

However—— she didn't do it.

If it meant exposing her beloved P-chan to such a cruel experience, she'd rather die courageously.

LLENN ran for a bit as instructed, then dropped to the ground, and rolled to avoid staying in one place.

While on the move, she glimpsed at the lake,

"Uuugh……"

She saw *Bullet Lines* moving in the sky and four *hovercraft* that were now much bigger than they looked some time ago, and for just a moment, she thought.

'Aah, is this the end to our progress?'

Hearing LLENN groan——

M brought his right hand index finger close to his trigger, and squeezed it the moment he touched it.

The strange rifle roared for the first time in SJ.

Flame and gas spouted out from the muzzle that was close to the ground, and enveloped in them, the 7.62 *mm* bullet began moving at twice the speed of sound.

The bullet advanced, creeping above the lake, and the air that it pushed aside created multiple small waves.

And then, it was absorbed by the face of one *character*.

"Gafu!"

Hearing the strange voice coming from behind him, and that the HK21 stopped firing at the same, the man who was operating the *hovercraft*,

"Wha?"

He turned his head to the left and back.

What he saw was,

"Gaa……"

A red hit *effect* shining in the centre of his comrade Jake's face. *Guun*, the *hit point gauge* shown on his right side was decreasing, turning yellow, then red, and then it reached zero.

He knew what had happened to Jake. An attack to a vital point that caused instant death.

"H…… ow?"

But, what he didn't know was how it had happened.

Before a person is shot by an enemy whose location is known, a *Bullet Line* should definitely be shown. In this case, Jake was the one who was shot, but the *system* should have judged that he was also targeted since he was really close to Jake, thus he should have similarly seen it .

But, he did not see it at all. If he did, he would have immediately put pressure on the *handle* to turn the rudder; and he had been straining his nerves.

And then, just as he faced forward,

"Gaa!"

He felt a shock on the left side of his chest, as if someone had stabbed him with a stick, and understood that he had been shot. And once again, he could not see the *Bullet Line*.

Just as his *hit points* began decreasing with a *guu* sound, he unintentionally turned the *handle* to the left with his inclining body.

Suddenly having its *handle* turned while travelling at full speed, the *hovercraft* lost its balance as it skidding to the right, and the moment the hull's side touched the water's surface, the vehicle immediately capsized.

Jake's corpse, and the still-alive man who had been riding on the hovercraft were thrown out, and, after bouncing once like a stone used in stone skipping, they fell into the water.

'Shit!'

The man attempted to shout, but underwater, it only made the the sound of the air escaping from his mouth.

His body began rapidly sinking. The G36K cut into his shoulder due to its *sling*, and along with the magazines and bulletproof *plate*, became awful *weights*.

The lake was really clear, and as expected of being inside a *game*, he could see underwater very clearly even with the naked eye. The bottom of the lake was far below him, submerged houses were beautifully lined up, and the man felt as if he was gazing from the sky.

'My comrade's corpse with a 【Ｄｅａｄ】*marker* is sinking by my side, but including that, it's a scene that I can't look at', the man thought.

All the air left his lungs and, probably having entered „drowning *mode*", his *hit points* decreasing pace suddenly accelerated due to being underwater.

This was a *game*, thus it wasn't as if breathing was painful, but it felt as if his body was enveloped in a dull and uncomfortable feeling. There was no longer any doubt that he'd drown. Even if he operated a *window* and completely removed his equipment, his *hit points* would run out before he can rise to the surface.

'Guys! That shield bastard's *Bullet Lines* can't be seen at all!'

The man tried shouting to inform his partners about the danger before he died, but he couldn't voice it. Even if he could, the convenient communication *item* would not be able to transmit his words while underwater.

While drowning, the man pondered about the events back then.

'How, in what way, due to what reason, can't the *Bullet Lines* be seen despite being shot by an enemy whose position is known?——'

'I get it!'

Being the *team's gun maniac*, he realised what the simple, yet difficult to execute *trick* was.

Not having a way to inform his allies about it, he continued sinking and, at the bottom of the approximately 20 *metre*-deep lake——

The *hit points* of the man who had a skull *emblem* reached zero.

"Two for starters……"

While muttering, M moved his *scoped* gaze towards his next prey.

"Two? Did you get them?"

Hearing this, LLENN, who had been running around like a mad man, suddenly stopped and dropped to the ground.

Looking at the lake, she saw that the leftmost *hovercraft* had completely toppled over, and, *topun*, was sinking now.

There should have been two people on it.

"……Wow!"

The fact that a *hovercraft* of their comrades had toppled over, its two passengers were thrown into the lake, and that neither of them could be saved,

"What the!" "What!" "Huh?"

Were all, of course, seen by the remaining *team members* as well.

"They got Jake's group!"

Hearing the voice of his partner in front of him, who was controlling the *hovercraft*

"Shitt!"

The *leader* cursed reflexively, and thought.

'We let our guard down.'

'Jake had been pounding away with his gun, thus both of them overlooked the *Bullet Lines*.'

That's why he sent an order to his comrades.

"Don't let your guard down! Dodge the *lines*!"

The man who loudly shouted was sharp-eyed man who rode in the back of a *hovercraft* with two people on it.

M aimed the centre of his *scope* at that man's chest, and then slightly moved it. A bit below. And then, he matched the horizontal movement of the *hovercraft*, and factored in the deviation.

He did not see the *Bullet Circle*.

He fired.

The bullet had a strong recoil, but the M14 EBR's weight and M's large build supported it. A golden empty cartridge was shot out to the right with great force, bounce of the *asphalt*, turned into particles of light, and disappeared.

Just as it disappeared, a second one was fired.

"Unbelievable……"

Observed the scene while blankly standing up at the lake shore.

There wasn't a single *Bullet Line* coming towards her anymore. There was no need to run around either.

While getting away, LLENN certainly saw it. How right after M discharged 2 bullets in succession, the movement of the *hovercraft* travelling farthest to the right stopped suddenly.

M undoubtedly brought down the two men riding it. If the people *accelerating* the *hovercraft* were gone, the vehicle would only drift about out of inertia.

The remaining two vehicles hastily turned their rudders, and she saw them beginning to make a U *turn*. Four people were killed in the blink of an eye, thus it seemed that they were hastily running way.

LLENN took out her borrowed monocle from her combat uniform's *pocket*. And, the moment she saw the turning away *hovercraft* in her field of vision——

The sound of M firing with his M14 EBR resounded, and a red hit *effect* began shining on the right shoulder of the man who was operating it.

And then, another shot. This time, it hit his temporal region. A 【Ｄｅａｄ】*marker* appeared above the head of the man whose head had drooped.

LLENN saw M's sniping skills for the first time. Although the distance between them was short, M's opponent was moving at high speed. M hit

his vitals that quickly.

Then, LLENN decreased the magnification to search for the last vehicle and——

'Did he just turn the rudder in the opposite direction midway through his U *turn* and is now charging towards me?' His comrades had been shot and he was now alone, thus it seemed that he had already given up on escaping.

She clearly saw it in her field of vision, magnified by the monocle. The man had completely lay down. The only thing that she saw was his right hand, which was grasping the *handle*.

"M-san! He's coming at us!"

LLENN put down the monocle, and took the P90 hanging from her shoulder into her hands.

The *hovercraft* was charging in the approximate direction of her and M, who was about 30 *metres* to the right. He was coming at a never before seen speed, as if he went into *full throttle*.

Steadily becoming bigger, he was now less than 100 *metres* away. It seemed that he'd land in about 5 more seconds.

LLENN hesitated whether or not she should shoot him. If she did, she was close enough to hit the *hovercraft*, rather than the person, with several bullets. However, it really did not seem like she would stop him with that.

At that moment,

"Lie down."

She heard M's calm voice.

LLENN turned her gaze to the right and saw M standing up from behind the shield, and throwing something with a strong *form*.

Drawing a large parabola, was a *plasma grenade*. Moreover, it was the *type* called the „Giga-*nade*" that was three times more powerful than normal, .

It was way too big for LLENN's small hands to throw it, but as expected of M. He looked like an *American football* player.

'He can't be serious! Will that really hit the *hovercraft*?

LLENN thought, but——

"Agh……"

Of course that did not happen - the *plasma grenade* fell into the open water about 20 *metres* away, causing a thick *dopon* sound.

'That failed!'

It happened the moment after she had that thought.

The *hovercraft* passed above where the grenade fell in, and was struck by bluish-white light. That's what LLENN saw while hearing a muffled explosion.

The *plasma grenade* that exploded underwater raised the lake water in an approximately 10 *metre* in diameter hemisphere, and that's where the *hovercraft* was going.

The pressure of the blast joined in—— and with the combination of the *vectors*, it resulted in a splendid and long *jump*.

"Byahaaaaa!"

With an interesting shout, the man and *hovercraft* went into the air.

From the left to the right side of LLENN's field of vision,

"Aaaaaaaaaaa!"

Went the scream of the man wearing light brown, desert-use camouflage.

The jump was around 10 *metres* in height and 30 *metres* in distance. And it was still ongoing.

Despite LLENN thinking that, flying at this rate, the man would cross the K-point[43], land with a magnificent turn and begin his counterattack——

Such a movie-like scene did not occur.

Beginning to fall forward in the sky, the *hovercraft* finally completely toppled over, and the man inside fell out as if it spit him out.

On the road about 20 *metres* away from LLENN,

"Hyaaa—— guke!"

The man fell on his back.

[43] The K-point (construction point) is a line across a ski jumping hill which indicates the hill's steepest point in meters. It was formerly used to classify the size of a ski jumping hill, and to calculate the number of points granted by a given jump.

Late by a beat, the *hovercraft* fell even further, and the loud sound of the hull breaking resounded. The water scattered by the explosion sprayed the surroundings.

"Bring him down! LLENN!"

"Gotcha!"

LLENN began running towards the man at a fierce *dash*. Running at a superhuman speed, she stopped in front of the man with his face up while sliding with her feet, and

"Huh?"

Met eyes with the man with a blank facial expression.

"Sorry!"

Along with that samurai-like word, LLENN pointed the P90 down and fired in *full auto* rapid-fire.

In order to ensure that he wouldn't counterattack, she had no choice but to shoot him. If he pressed the activation switch of a *plasma grenade*, she would also die alongside him.

Although she only fired for about 2 seconds, but in that time, thirty hit *effects* were created on the man's body. With his hands bouncing and a red *effect* flashing from his face and body, it was a considerably nasty scene.

Just as she stopped firing, *pikon*, the 【Ｄｅａｄ】 *marker* appeared.

"Haa"

LLENN's body shook for a moment, and she extended her right hand index finger.

It was a bad idea to shoot him more. It's not that it would be a waste of bullets, but that it would be one of the worst *manners* - shooting a corpse would be ≪*overkill*≫—— in other words, „killing too much".
k o r o s h i s u g i

"Haah……Whew……"

LLENN took in a long breath, and finally transferred her P90 to her shoulder, and then,

"I am really sorry."

She joined her palms together

Chapter 10 – LLENN and M

"M-san! I brought him down!"

After finishing her prayer for the man, LLENN faced M with a refreshing smile and voice. Such a smile after killing the man herself and then even praying for him. As is usual for a *game*.

"Yeah, well done."

As M answered, he began folding up the shield that protected him. He performed a move that was the opposite of extending it, in other words, he spread his arms, then brought them together to flatten the shield. Finally, the shield was returned to its layered state, and M put it in his *backpack*.

LLENN looked for the monocle that she had dropped, picked it up, and returned it to her pocket.

Then, approaching at a half-run, she arrived in front of M, who had put the *backpack* on his back and taken the M14 EBR into his arms.

"But still, M-san, that was amazing! You sniped them that easily!"

After she said that much, she came up with another thought,

"But…… Why… didn't they avoid M-san's *Bullet Lines*?"

And voiced it.

And then,

"That's because they couldn't see them."

She heard M's words that were neither prideful nor boastful.

"Eeh? They couldn't see them? Why?"

"Because, I didn't create them."

"Eeh? Eeh? How? After all, they appear whenever you put your finger on the trigger, right?"

"That's why I didn't put my finger on it."

"Hah? Then, what about the *Bullet Circle*?"

"Naturally, it didn't appear."

"Hee? Then—— how did you aim?"

To LLENN's last consecutive question,

"Directly."

M gave a short answer.

LLENN remembered Pitohui's words.

"There are good things, LLENN-chan. You see, since GGO is a *game*, a lot of things can be done in simple way. Which is strikingly obvious in shooting."

If she wasn't mistaken, that took place in the ruins of a subway station.

It was conversation that took place after they wiped out about three *dozen* cleaning *robots*, whose AI had went mad and started attacking people, while they drank tea from a thermos flask in front of a pile of *scrap* that was illuminated by an eerie-coloured LED.

"Shooting is simple? What do you mean?"

"Yeah. For example, if we tried giving the *real* LLENN-chan a *real* P90. Well, let's forget about the Japanese Swords and Firearms Control Law for this. If we do, you'd be able to smoothly insert the *magazine*, pull the *cocking handle* to load the bullets, and even get into a proper stance with the gun, right?"

"Yeah. Probably."

"But, do you think you'd be able to shoot a human-size target 100 *metres* in front of you, like you can in GGO?"

"Eeh? Well…… I'm not really sure……?"

"Although there's a small chance that you'd be able to do it, it would probably be impossible. There's but one reason for that - there's no *assist*ance."

"Which……means?"

"In GGO, you see, if you aim your gun to some extent towards a target, and it falls into the area of the *Bullet Circle*, the *game system* will make the decision to „help adjust the aiming for you to hit the target"."

"The-then……, that means that we're „not actually aiming accurately"?"

"Right. GGO *players* think that they can hit the target with their violent shooting skills, but actually, they're being helped tremendously by the *game system*. As the *characters* playing the game *level* up and acquire guns with high accuracy and power, this *assist*ance becomes more and more pronounced. In other words, you don't need to aim properly for the hit to be registered. It's something like ≪*Sword Skills*≫. GGO *players* „can shoot more easily", so they become stronger."

"I see…… It's something like my speed, huh."

"I've tried it out before; I took and steadied a high-precision sniper rifle, and seized the moment when the target was at the centre of the *Bullet Circle* seen through the *scope*—— and then, I pulled the trigger violently, with the gun shaking, no matter how you look at it. Now, what do you think could have happened to the bullet I fired?"

"It hit……. the target?"

"Correct, right in the middle, just as the *Bullet Circle* showed. That's how

I confirmed. That GGO's gun triggers are „bluntly put, kinda like the manipulation of a *controller*'s *button*"."

"I see…… So, that's what you meant that „they're being considerably helped", huh. Then, Pito-san, what would happen if GGO truly reproduced *severely real* shooting?"

"Let's see. In that case, it would probably either be an *Everest*-like difficulty shit *game*, where even after tens of hours of shooting practice on the level of actual soldiers, people would only be beginners, or a laugh-inducing shit game where almost everyone would be firing with *assault rifles* 100 *metres* away from each other."

"Uhyaa."

"A *game*'s a *game*. It can't be helped even if you take *reality* too seriously. GGO's fine as it is."

"I see…… Then, Pito-san, a question."

"Yeah, this proactive attitude of yours is a very good thing about you. Expect this to be reflected on your school report."

"Thank you very much! ——What would happen if a person who was sufficiently good at *real* shooting played this game?"

"That's a really good question. I give you a perfect mark."

"Thanks! ——So, what about the answer?"

"I've harboured the exact same question, and decided to test it. I invited an acquaintance of mine who's a *gun maniac* and good at shooting with live ammunition."

"A-and then?"

"He was a bit bewildered at first, but once he grasped it, he instantly became able to hit the target by shooting violently. „As I expected, it's reproduced well precisely because it's an *American game*", that's what he said."

"Hoo! It's a thing that you mentioned earlier - what a person can do with their *player* ability rather than their *character* ability."

"Right, that's exactly that. However, that guy added this. „The *Bullet Circle assist*ance is a two-edged sword", that's what he said."

"Which means?"

"The answer is that it tells you where the bullet will fly before you fire. That's why, „Even if you don't aim properly, you can still fire, thus this *game* cannot be used to practice *RL* shooting. On the contrary, it would probably dull your skills. It could probably only be used for practicing to grasp the *timing* of firing." The observable difference is disgustingly wide".

"I see…… But, well, I wouldn't be able to play without it. ——So, what's the good point?"

"Yeah. „Because of this, long-distance sniping becomes overwhelmingly easy." You see, shooting at a far away enemy with a gun is absurdly difficult. You know why you can't just aim at the centre of the *scope*?"

"I learnt that from the NPC demon sergeant's sniping *tutorial*. Bullets are pulled by gravity and fly in a parabola, so you have to aim upwards, accounting for how much the bullet would fall based on the distance."

"That's not all. When aiming at a target who is above or below you, the

descent of the bullet decreases in proportion to the angle; if the temperature and altitude are high, the air becomes thin, and so the bullet can fly better; if there is wind, it, naturally, blows the bullet; the bullet also drifts in the direction that it rotates; and if you're aiming for super-long-distance sniping at a target 1 *km* or farther away, you also have to consider the „*Coriolis* force", caused by the rotation of the Earth.

"Sensei, I don't get it anymore."

"Well, the point is, a lot of calculations and experience is required for long-distance sniping. *Real snipers* get familiar with all of this by shooting hundreds of bullets to practice, observing how their bullets fly from their guns. But——"

"I get it! The *Bullet Circle* does the calculations completely automatically like a *computer*. The *system* tells you 'right now, you will hit here'. It becomes super simple."

"That's right."

"Directly."

Hearing M's short answer, LLENN immediately remembered her conversation with Pitohui and,

"I get it! M-san is the acquaintance of Pito-san who is good at shooting *IRL*!"

"Huh? …… Yeah. That's right."

With that, all the questions in LLENN's head were answered one after another.

"By „aiming directly", you mean that you didn't use the the *Bullet Circle assist*ance; you fired even though you didn't use it, right? In other words, M-san, you peeked through the *scope*, calculated where you needed to aim with your effort alone, and fired!"

"Right."

"Hence, M-san, you didn't put your finger on the trigger until just before firing! That is why the the *Bullet Lines* weren't created either, and even though they could have appeared for a moment just as you fired, they didn't notice them because it was too short!"

"Right."

M continued nodding, as if this was a very easy thing to do.

"That's amazing M-san! That is…… absurdly advantageous!"

LLENN did not hide her excitement.

GGO's *Bullet Circle* and *Bullet Lines* are similarly advantageous to both attackers and defenders.

However, if one could shoot without needing the *Bullet Circle* like M, wouldn't it be a one-sided advantage to the attacker? Moreover, it wasn't really a *cheat* that tampered with the *system*. It was an *advantage* that depended on one's *player skill*.

With that shield and M's shooting abilities, he could calmly continue shooting continuously no matter how much he was under fire. And if she also counted herself, who could run around as a decoy with her nimble and tiny body——

"We can win this! One *team* to go! We can beat them! We can get the

gold *medal*!"

"That would be nice. The *scan* is starting soon."

"Eeh?"

At that moment, LLENN's wristwatch began vibrating. It was 14:59:30.

At last, an hour had passed.

"It's only been an hour……"

LLENN seriously thought that this hour was the longest in her life.

That was because she had never experienced running from place to place, running around and hiding, and being showered with over several hundreds of bullets in her life, even if this was an incident in a *virtual* world.

LLENN took out the *satellite scan* terminal from her left breast *pocket*.

The terminal had been hit numerous times when she suddenly dropped to the ground, but if it was broken, it would be impossible to continue with SJ, thus it was an indestructible *object*. She pressed the *switch*, and the map appeared before her.

The *scan* would begin in 20 seconds.

The aimlessly wandering *team* in the southern desert-wilderness region being still alive was undoubtedly the reason they did not hear the victory *fanfare* moments ago.

10 minutes ago, the group was at the southern tip of the map, but it was obvious that they would be coming here. Well, there was also the

possibility that they would be running from place to place for some strange reason. For example, if the remaining *team* got tired of fighting and are planning to continue running away until they drop out, or something like that.

While having such thoughts, LLENN looked at M, and noticed that M took something out from his left upper arm *pocket*.

LLENN wondered if it was some new weapon, but it was a very ordinary and folded writing paper.

Before he expanded and read it, M looked at the terminal. She did not know what that writing paper was for, but the *scan* was obviously more important.

This time, it was a considerably slow *scan* from the north-west.

Firstly, the annihilated-resigned teams in the prairie and swamp were shown as grey dots.

"Come on come on!"

LLENN let out her thoughts at the irritating *scan*.

Finally, at the spot where their own light dot was displayed, a grey dot was shown, almost overlapping with their position——

"Now then, the moment of truth……"

LLENN closely observed the map. The *scan* should now display the whereabouts of the sole remaining enemy *team*.

'Where are they? How many *km* away are they? Considering their position 10 minutes ago and the speed of a human, they should be in the

desert, but where exactly?'

'If they're in the desert-wilderness area, we can come to them', LLENN enthusiastically thought. 'In that case, my *pink* camouflage will be of use, so we can make another ambush. Or, I could start running magnificently at full-speed and be the decoy for M's „no *Bullet Line* sniping."'

Engulfed in excitement and fighting spirit,

"So, where are they? How far away are they?"

LLENN muttered and saw.

The light dot aside from their own shining on the map.

"Huh?"

It was in the square 1 *km* to the west of their current position, right next to them. About 600 *metres* in distance.

"Wha?"

Before LLENN could come to realise the meaning behind this, bullets came flying at her.

LLENN did not hear the sound of the bullets flying.

Because she was hit.

"Huh?"

A dull pain ran down her right flank, as if she was suddenly grabbed, and the world began revolving.

The map that she had been looking at flew away into a corner of her vision, she then saw the red sky, then the cracked *asphalt*, then the lake and, finally, a species of grass that she did not even know the name of came into view.

'I was shot!'

'And sent flying!'

Just as she realised this, she saw that her *hit points* displayed in the corner of her vision began decreasing with a *guun* sound. The speed was frighteningly high; the gauge immediately became yellow, and still wasn't stopping——

'Ah? This…… is probably…… instant death……'

The moment that she had that thought, the gauge became red, and the gauge stopped decreasing, leaving only a sliver.

Barely, truly by the skin of her teeth, LLENN survived, but——

"Aah? Eeh?"

She could not calm her thoughts after the sudden *shock*. The fact that she was sent flying and the world was shaken up, rather than the pain of being shot, dealt great *damage*. Her head was spinning as if she had motion sickness.

The next moment, LLENN floated into the air.

"Hahe?

Her body suddenly floated up, the grass that she saw 3 *metres* ahead of her disappeared, and she saw the red sky.

"Don't go wild! Let's run away!"

Hearing M's voice and, at the same time, feeling the acceleration in her movement, LLENN understood what happened. She was being carried by M. And M began running.

Byun *byun*, the sound of bullets flying could be heard close and far. *Tan* *tan*, the sound of a gun firing from afar could be heard as well. They were still under fire.

And, *bishi*, with the sound of something being pierced,

"Guu"

M let out a short sound.

'M was also shot. Our opponent is a *sniper*. This is a relatively open area. There aren't many places where we can hide. And most of all, I'll be dead even if I'm just grazed by a bullet.'

'Are we done for?'

'Is it over for us?'

'Are we going to lose? Were we only able to come this far?'

The moment that these thoughts overwhelmed her,

"Sorry."

M gave a short apology. Without even the time to consider the meaning of it, LLENN was thrown. After a short fall, LLENN had a rough landing on her bottom.

In most VR *games*, there would be *damage* caused by falling from high altitude. She was worried that her *hit points* would be completely drained by falling on her behind like this, but this did not happen.

And then, in LLENN's vision,

"What the?"

The gaudy green camouflage pattern that M used spread out. She couldn't see anything else.

'Where and in what state am I——'

Byun. *Byun*. *Byun*.

She only knew that she was still somewhere where she was under fire and right behind M.

Byun, *byun*, *biiiiiiiiin*.

The next moment, following the sound of bullets flying, a high-pitched *engine* could be heard, and she felt acceleration pushing her body further to the back, as well as a wind flowing at the back of her head.

Turning her head to the right and freeing her vision from the camouflage pattern, she saw the red surface of the lake that was reflecting the red sky. It was flowing from the left to the right.

"Aah"

LLENN finally understood.

That she was currently riding in a *hovercraft*. M, who threw her into the

back seat, was operating it from the front seat. The camouflage pattern that initially filled her vision was his *backpack*.

"We're getting out of here!"

"O-okay……"

"Apply it while you have the time."

"G-gotcha……"

Although the sound was the same, what was used wasn't a gun, but a first aid *kit*.

LLENN took out a cylindrical kit from her *pouch*, and, since she no longer needed to worry about her position on the shaking *hovercraft*, she applied it to her cheek, and pressed the *button* on the opposite side. Her body was momentarily enveloped in a red healing *effect*.

LLENN's almost completely drained *hit points* would now finally recover by thirty percent, but it would take 180 seconds to finish.

Byubyubyubyubyubyubyubyubyunbyubyubyun

She heard the sound of bullets flying at them increasing, unyielding against the noise of the *engine*.

"A *machine gun* huh. Well, they can hardly hit us at this range."

'Were M's words meant to calm me down, or himself?'

While unable to determine this, LLENN was rocked by the *hovercraft* for several tens of seconds.

Finally,

"We're safe now. We're at least 1 *km* away."

Alongside M's voice, the *hovercraft*'s speed decreased slightly. The sound of flying bullets could no longer be heard.

With a blank expression, she gazed at the surface of the flowing lake.

"……"

"LLENN, you asleep?"

"No, I am fine…… Thank you very much for saving me."

"Were you half asleep? You started using keigo."

"Wha? Ah, yeah…… but, I'm sorry—— sorry. For doing nothing……"

"No need to apologise. I was negligent in observing our surroundings as well. Well, even if we were vigilant, it wouldn't be that easy to see what's 600 *metres* ahead of us. More so when our opponent is hiding."

"Haah……"

The *hovercraft* continued moving.

Based on the position of the sun, all she knew was that they were heading south-west.

"M-san, what're we going to do?"

"For the time being, we'll put some distance between us and them until the next *scan*. And fully recover our *hit points*."

LLENN moved her eyes, and gazed at the upper-left corner of her vision. Currently, her *hit points* were still recovering, just a bit away from 10 *percent*. Still red.

As for M, his decreased by a bit and was probably at eighty percent. Was it because of his sturdy body, or that he wasn't shot at any critical points, or both?

"I'll apply it on you too, M-san."

"Thanks. It's in the *penholder* on my left arm."

LLENN applied it to the nape of M's neck in his stead, who was using his right hand for driving. She got a short expression of gratitude in return.

"I can't believe that they were that close……"

As LLENN muttered, she remembered the shock of the sniping she had endured just moments ago,

"Uuuu……."

And shivered slightly. While admiring that even the chills were reproduced in the VR *game*,

"Even though they were far away 10 minutes ago……"

She let out her honest impression.

"I was negligent as well. It's the same as with this *hovercraft*. Those guys got their hands on some vehicle as well."

"Ahh! So that's it……"

"It's only my guess, but when the *game* enters the final stage, they become easy to get in various spots to increase the speed of the *teams*. It's probably either a four-wheel-drive car that can be used even in deserts and wastelands, or a *truck*. And, they are *players* that are skilled at driving them."

"Uugh…… we've been negligent……"

"Don't feel down. You really are a *lucky girl* after all."

"W-why?"

"You didn't die because of that sniper, right? 10 *cm* more, and it would be recognised as a hit to the heart or lungs and would have led to instant death."

"Well, that's true……"

"The enemy *sniper* was barely in range as well. He was at a range where he could only hit a still target."

"But, M-san, you were hit too, right?"

"That was a fluke. Because I'm huge. I saw the *Bullet Line*, but it was aimed at my thigh, so I ignored it. It was also fortunate that the *hovercraft* with the two corpses had just come to shore."

'I see, M's talking about the guys that were the most to the right when he sniped them', LLENN understood.

"That *sniper*'s gun is a 7.62 mm class, and the interval between firing was narrow, so it must be automatic, with a *magazine* that has at least 10

bullets. It's more bothersome than a *bolt-action*, so don't let your guard down."

"Gotcha…… I absolutely won't let my guard down until the end of the *game* anymore! I won't be prideful either!"

"Yeah. That's a reliable answer."

'What's reliable is you, M-san.'

LLENN began to say and stopped. No matter how many words of gratitude she offered, it wouldn't be enough for M. She decided to hold on to it until SJ ended before saying it.

Instead, she enquired about his plan.

"Where are we headed now?"

"The south-west. We'll be landing at the wilderness that you can see on the left-hand side right now."

"Eeh?"

LLENN turned her head to the left, and saw the landscape. She discovered a wilderness of rocks and sand stretching about 300 *metres* away from surface of the red lake.

"Why? Wouldn't it be better to head to the north-east and cross the lake and swamp? Our opponents are using a car, right? Won't they come chasing after us?"

"That's right, but we can't. We don't have much fuel left. There's no guarantee that we'd be able to cross the lake and swamp."

"Oh……"

'Even a useful tool becomes a mere ornament if it runs out of fuel, huh', LLENN gazed up at the sky.

*　*　*

Roughly 4 minutes ago——

At 14:59.

In the residential area, there was a gorgeous house far away from the houses on the ground. Atop the wide *balcony* on the third floor of the house,

"Found them! Tohma, get over here!"

A woman that was holding binoculars while lying on the ground shouted in a menacing, deep voice.

Her height was at least 180 *cm*, she had developed muscles, and her chest was bulky - she was a woman that looked like a female *pro wrestler*. If it wasn't for her braided, brown hair hanging down to her left and right, it would probably be hard to even determine her gender. As for her age, she seemed to be easily past her mid-thirties.

She was wearing camouflage clothes, dotted in several shades of green.She had equipped a *vest* with several *magazine pouches*.

"Where are they? *Boss*."

A voice rang out from behind, and another woman crawled out into the *balcony*.

This one was slightly shorter, but even so, she was easily over 175 *cm* tall. Based on her appearance, she was slightly younger, but nonetheless she was a fine adult. She had the same camouflage and equipment on her slender body. Underneath her green *knit cap* was her black short cut hair.

A Russian-made sniper ≪*Dragunov*≫ was held in the hands of the woman named Tohma. It was a sniper which represented the old Eastern Bloc, and had a characteristic *silhouette* that looked slender and elegant. Its ammunition were 7.62x54 mmR rounds. A *semi-auto* gun that could fire every time the trigger was pulled. As for its *scope*, it didn't use the quadruple magnification one that is typically used on a *Dragunov*, but a larger and rougher looking one that could magnify three-fold to nine-fold. It came with an exclusive *bipod* in front of its *magazine*.

While pointing to the north-west over the *balcony*'s guardrail with her left hand, the woman called '*Boss*' said,

"Do you see the point where the lake shore turns to a road? One minute to the left of the *silhouette* of the crashed spaceship."

Tohma nimbly unfolded the *bipod* of her *Dragunov*, and assumed a prone posture on the floorboard of the *balcony*.

"Two people sighted. A chibi in dusky-*pink*, and a giant in a camouflage pattern."

Boss used the rangefinder of her binoculars and,

"That's them. 623 *metres* to the chibi. ——It's far, can you do it?"

"I can! It's our *chance*!"

"Alright! Begin with the small target."

"Roger."

Tohma turned the *dial* on the right side of her *scope*, and raised her magnification to the maximum. In the magnified, circular field of vision, the playful *pink*-coloured enemy became bigger.

Boss's voice could be heard.

"Everyone, listen up. Tohma will snipe the chibi. Rosa and Sophie, prepare your *machine guns*. They're on the north-west lake shore. On my command, fire like crazy. Anna, search for other enemy *members* and, if possible, shoot them. Tanya, *check* the *satellite scan*."

'Roger', four female voices answered over the communication *item*. This was proof that there were still six members remaining, in other words, it was a *full member* squad, and that all of them were female *characters*.

And so, the clock struck 15 o'clock.

In the field of vision of *Boss*'s binoculars, the *pink* chibi and camouflage-patterned giant man became bigger, and a map was displayed from the *satellite scan* terminal.

The fact that they expanded a large map in front of them was proof that they weren't watching out for approaching enemies.

Boss's mouth opened widely to the side, exposing her canines.

"Those guys sure will be surprised. ——Tohma?"

Tohma aligned the *Bullet Circle* in the lower-right part of her *scope* with the *pink* target. The *circle* contracted based on her heartbeats, but the flickering was really gradual, and at its largest, it almost entirely *covered*

the *pink* chibi's body.

"Preparations complete."

"Do it."

Right after the command was given, before her heart began beating faster in excitement, Tohma waited for the *timing* when the *circle* was at its smallest, and then squeezed the trigger.

The *Dragunov* roared, and its long and narrow body sprang up sharply, as if it was hit by a whip. An empty shell was expelled to the right.

The fired bullet flew, piercing the wall of air and——

And flung up the small *pink* body 3 *metres* into the air.

"Bullseye! Nice skill you have Tohma! After the *game*, I'll treat you to a piece of purin[44]!"

Boss's cheerful voice reached all her party members, and Tohma replied,

"If possible, I want a second!"

And fired for the second time.

It was a bullet aimed for the giant man. The *Bullet Circle* was perfectly focused on his body, but the bullet missed. Because the giant man rushed over to the chibi with nimble movements.

"Shi-!"

[44] Japanese name for creme caramel or custard pudding.

Tohma continued firing as she aligned her the *Bullet Circle* with the moving giant man. However, her pulse rose in excitement, consequently increasing the speed of contraction and *size* of the circle, thus the bullets continued missing.

The giant man suddenly grabbed the chibi with his right hand, put her on his right shoulder, and proceeded to the lake. There was a drifting *hovercraft* there.

"Like hell I'm letting you!"

Tohma continued firing. 1 bullet somehow hit the giant man's right thigh, and created a red hit *effect*.

However, that did not stop the giant man's movement. He mercilessly kicked away the two corpses on the *hovercraft*, threw the chibi to the back seat, and the driver's seat himself.

Tohma's 10th bullet raised a waterspout on the side of the *hovercraft*. The fact that the *bolt* that would move back and forth each time she fired stopped at the lower position indicated that her remaining bullets numbered zero. At the same moment,

" *Boss*. Their position is the lake shore. One of the two is the *leader*."

Came the voice of Tanya, who had been looking at the *scan*. *Boss* immediately gave the order.

" *Machine guns*, fire."

The next moment, a roar sprung forth from two windows of the third floor of a mansion.

From a child's *bedroom*, and a back room.

At the windows of the two rooms were two women, who had set up ≪PKM≫ *machine guns* on *bipods*, and their atrocious muzzles continued emitting fire towards the lake.

These were also Russian-made *machine guns* that used the same bullets as the *Dragunov*. They were masterpieces designed by Mikhail Kalashinikov-shi, the person who created the AK *assault rifle series*; PK were the initials for „Kalashinikov machine gun“[45], while M was the initial for “modernised”.

The PKMs continued firing several bullets at a time. From the case attached under the gun, ammunition tied to a *belt* flowed from right to left, the bullets went forwards, while the empty shells and empty *belt* were spit out to the left.

The bullets flew towards the escaping *hovercraft*. In the field of vision of her binoculars, *Boss* saw numerous waterspouts in the surroundings of the *hovercraft*, but there weren’t any bullets that hit the target.

“Hold your fire! ——It’s unfortunate, but it seems we let them get away.”

The two *machine guns* stopped roaring, and the world suddenly turned silent.

“Boss. The *scan* position is moving atop the lake.”

Came Tanya’s voice. While peeking through her binoculars, *Boss* asked,

“Anna, did you see any other enemies?”

[45] In Russian, Пулемёт Калашникова (Pulemyot Kalashnikova). Technically, it means “Kalashinikov’**s** (possessive case) machine gun”.

"No, *Boss*. I could not spot any."

"Me neither. ——So, the odds that that group only has two members left is high, huh."

Boss continued following the *hovercraft*, which was raising white-crested waves and going into the distance, until it disappeared.

"Those guys escaped to the south-west. There is a possibility that this is a *trick*, but the lack of fuel is a more likely case."

As *Boss* put her binoculars to her waist *pouch*, she said in a calm tone.

"From this point, we'll be heading to the north-western part of the wilderness. Everyone, gather at the *truck*."

The *team* that was given the name „foxtrot" some time ago——

Boarded the large *truck* stopped at the back of the mansion one by one.

To go after and take down their last prey.

* * *

15:06.

The place that LLENN and M landed at after finishing their seemingly elegant *cruise* on the lake was the south-western *area*, a wilderness of rock and sand.

Light brown ground already began with the bank of the lake, and it suddenly turned rugged. Naturally, it wasn't something that the *hovercraft* could traverse through. Even if it did, there was barely any

fuel left.

On the water, LLENN applied a second first-aid *kit* on herself. Her *hit point* recovery seemed to be nearly over. And yet, she only had sixty percent of her full state. She would probably need to use another one. Having abandoned their *hovercraft* at the bank, LLENN and M surveyed their surroundings vigilantly.

The wilderness was almost flat. There were oval rocks of various sizes throughout it. Starting with rocks that were 1 *metre* large in every direction, to large ones that were likely 5 *metres* tall. Because of this, there were plenty of places to hide in.

There weren't any hilly areas, on the contrary, if they climbed on a rock, they would be able to see reasonably far away.

It depended on the height of the rock that one would climb, and the height of other rocks in the surroundings, but it seemed that they could be used to see about 300 *metres* away. The ground full of pebbles lost to the paved road in terms of hardness, but it was better as a foothold.

"It's not bad as a place to fight. We can defend here, and we can snipe from atop a rock. The same applies to the enemy *team*, but we have LLENN's agility for that."

M said.

"And cars can't pass through here, right."

LLENN answered in agreement. She searched the surroundings as far as her monocle allowed, but she could not see any enemy figures for the time being.

As the healing of the second first-aid *kit* was over, LLENN applied the

last one to the nape of her neck. LLENN no longer had any more of them, but their enemy probably wasn't that kind to let them use any more of them anyway.

"Let's head west. We'll get away from the *hovercraft* a bit, and wait for the *scan* with our backs facing the water."

Agreeing with M's proposal, LLENN began slowly walking. There was the possibility that their opponents were chasing them by using the remaining *hovercrafts*, thus she constantly looked at the lake surface, but she could not see anything.

And so, it was 15:08.

The two hid in the shadow of a large rock, and decided to wait out the remaining 2 minutes.

'My *hit points* aren't full, but I recovered most of them. And, I won't let my guard down next time!'

"Ah! That reminds me……"

LLENN remembered. That before the 15 o'clock scan, M had taken out a writing paper and tried reading it. Since they were under fire, he should have left it unsettled.

"Say, M-san——"

LLENN turned around towards M, who was crouching at a place about 10 *metres* away from here,

"Like, didn't you try reading something like a letter some time ago? Are you sure it's okay?"

"Ah!"

Based on M's seriously surprised face, it seemed that he had completely forgotten about it.

"Thanks for reminding me. I was told to read it at exactly 15 o'clock."

M took out the writing paper from his arm *pocket*, opened it, and began reading.

Feeling relieved, LLENN returned her glance from M's face to watching the surroundings. She had to protect M while he was reading the letter.

She was interested in who the letter was from, and what was written on it, but since it was a breach of *manners* to peek at someone else's letter, even if this was a *virtual* world. LLENN only admired that someone would write a letter and carry it even in a VR *game*.

What stretched out in her field of vision was a wilderness of rocks and pebbles. The P90 in her hands was ready to fire at any time.

She took out two new *magazines* from her *storage*, thus, including the one equipped on her gun, she was back to seven on her body.

Using the opportunity, she materialised the two *plasma grenades* that she had added to her *storage* just in case, and hung them at the back of her left waist.

During the next battle, she'll definitely shoot them up. Even if she died, she'd take down one or two, as many as she could. If she realised that she was done for, she'd press the *switch* of the *grenades* on her waist and charge at them.

While calmly building up her war spirit, and sharpening her five senses,

LLENN waited for the *scan*, when she heard the sound of M putting away the letter behind her.

And she heard the sound of footsteps.

LLENN realised again that there were pebbles underneath them, and that footsteps were clearly audible. They could probably be heard even if they were several *metres* away. She'd better not carelessly move around when ambushing at this place.

Saku, *saku*, M's footsteps could be heard. They were coming towards her. The time on her wristwatch was 15:09.

'Does he want to have a strategy meeting and show the map? Or is this about the letter?'

While having these thoughts, LLENN suddenly turned around——

"Eeh?"

M's stood 2 *metres* ahead of her, held his HK45 with just his right hand, and was aiming the muzzle directly at her face.

"Sorry."

M fired.

LLENN clearly saw how the HK45's large muzzle shone.

Chapter 11 – Death Game

LLENN clearly saw how the HK45's large muzzle shone.

And she clearly heard the 45 calibre bullet passing by the side of her right ear.

If she hadn't acted before she realised the situation——

And if she hadn't *fully* demonstrated her agility and twisted her body——

The bullet would have hit her right eye, completely draining the *hit points* that she went through all the trouble of recovering, resulting in instant death.

M immediately swung his right arm, and continued aiming at LLENN's head.

To LLENN, it seemed like the world had entered *slow motion*. She clearly saw the *Bullet Line* closing in on her face. To avoid that, she twisted her body to the left again.

Another discharge. The bullet once again grazed her head, and this time, it tore off her favourite *knit cap*. If her movement had been just slightly slower, she would probably have been shot.

She did not understand his reasons at all, but she understood the situation.

She was being shot at by M. It seemed he wanted to kill her. And moreover, there was no use in trying to talk it over.

M, who was trying to fire the third bullet, showed a stern facial expression as always, and his emotions could not be read. However, there was no need to read them.

LLENN had but a single thought.

'No way I'm going to be killed.'

LLENN's left foot took hold of the pebbles, which became a foothold for generating repellent force. The 3rd *Bullet Line* approached her, and the moment it fixed at her right eye,

"Taa!"

LLENN jumped to the opposite side. Even if she kept escaping to the left like this, at some point she would undoubtedly be hit by a bullet.

In that case, there was only one course of action.

'I'm going to turn the tables!'

To make this dangerous gamble and attack him herself using any mistake in *timing*—— LLENN's agility won.

After LLENN energetically leaped forward and to the right, a *Bullet Line* that was 5 *cm* to the right of her body disappeared, and a bullet passed through. It wasn't even 1 cm away from the P90 that was hanging by its gun *sling*.

Having made a large *side step*, LLENN landed with her right leg. At that point, M wasn't even 1 *metre* away, while the HK45 was even closer, merely about 30 *cm* away. It was a distance she could easily cover if she extended her hand.

"Yah!"

LLENN raised her hand towards the HK45 to slap it with her right hand. To prevent his gun from being knocked away, M slipped his hand outwards——

LLENN's small hand just brushed the HK45's side and M's large thumb, and continued swinging upwards.

Having protected his HK45, M once again aimed the muzzle at LLENN's forehead while overlooking the small body before him,

"Ahaha."

And after meeting eyes with LLENN who was laughing, he pulled the trigger without hesitation.

He could not pull it.

The HK45's trigger refused to move. If the trigger did not move, the gun could not fire.

M's eyes opened wide and saw. That the small *lever* near his right hand that controlled the safety of his beloved gun had been raised.

What LLENN's small hands were aiming for wasn't to knock his HK45 out of his hands——

It was only aimed at activating the safety.

The moment that M realised this, a pain ran through his right hand.

The P90 roared in *full auto* between the large and small bodies.

The shooting actually only lasted a moment, but a pleasant *barara* sound resounded, and 3 bullets were fired. The small bullets created shining red hit *effects* on M's right wrist, and even passed through them entirely, disappearing into the sky.

"Gah!"

The HK45 with its safety on fell out of M's relaxed right hand, and just as half of it sunk into the sand,

"Don't move."

The muzzle of the P90 that was thrust up with her right arm pressed into the nape of M's neck.

"If you move even in the slightest, I'll pull the trigger with all my strength! M-san!"

LLENN gave a shout that was probably the loudest in her life so far. The wristwatch on her left arm quivered, but she could no longer worry about that.

She planned to completely squeeze the trigger to discharge all 47 remaining bullets in the *magazine*, *showering* M from the neck up if any part of his large build moved even 1 mm. M looked like he had high vitality, but he would probably die anyway.

"……"

With a muzzle thrusted to the left of his laryngeal prominence, M looked down at her.

His stern face with his eyes and mouth open hardened, as if time had stopped.

"Listen up. Firstly——"

LLENN smiled sweetly,

"I really have to thank you for telling me the location of your safety, thinking that I might need to use it as some point. It was really useful!"

"……"

"Moreover, I want to ask—— why?"

"……"

"Why did you try to kill me? If you have a proper reason, I'll hear you out."

"……"

"After all that effort to get here; we fought together, you even saved me, and thus we're one of the last two *teams* standing, so why? I have no intention of saying that we absolutely have to win, but I can't accept that you tried to kill me for unknown reasons. If you couldn't continue with the match, then you could have just discussed with me first! Am I wrong?"

"……"

"If you don't want to answer, suit yourself. Then, I'll fight on my own from this point on——"

While saying this, LLENN put more force into pressing the P90.

"Noooooooooooooooo! I don't want to die! ——Pppp-please…… Ppp-please wait! Please…… I beg of you! Please don't…… shoot…… Noo! Please stop!"

LLENN understood that this shout and feeble keigo were M's words, but it still took some time for her to realise that.

While pulling her P90, LLENN immediately *back stepped*.

With her exceedingly agile jump, she instantly gained distance from M, as if she had *warped*, placed her P90 on her shoulder, and fixed her aim at M's face with her sights.

She kept her finger on the trigger, so the *Bullet Circle* violently pulsated above M's face, and repeatedly contracted.

M should certainly be seeing dazzling *Bullet Lines*. His field of vision was probably dyed deep red.

"P-pp……"

While giving a groan, M slowly dropped his knees. Cautiously watching over him, LLENN continued adjusting her aim to target his head.

His knees made a sound as they sunk into the pebbles, and then, his large build feebly knelt down. It wasn't like she gave him such an order, but he assumed a seiza[46] pose. The still standing LLENN, and the sitting, but with barely any change in his height, M held their ground about 3 *metres* away from each other.

"Please…… don't shoot……"

A feeble voice came from M. With his eyes cast down as he spoke, M's face was covered by the wide brim of his *bush hat*, and disappeared from sight.

While aligning her *circle* with the *bush hat* head, LLENN said,

"Until I hear your reasons, I definitely won't shoot. In other words, if you don't tell me, I'll shoot."

"I'll end up dying……"

[46] Seiza (正座, literally "proper sitting") is a term for a Japanese traditional way of sitting when a person kneels down with the tops of the feet flat on the floor, and sit on the soles.

"Well, yeah."

"Boku will die……"

'Boku?', LLENN had the chills at the sudden change in M's first person pronoun.[47]

"Stop using keigo! You're giving off a weird vibe!"

It seemed that the person that she thought of as a „relative oji-san" until now suddenly turned into a „younger cousin, who was a primary school student", which gave her an overly strong sense of discomfort preventing her from calming down.

It was as if the person inside had changed places with someone else. LLENN of course hadn't done it before, but it was possible to borrow an *AmuSphere* and control someone else's *character*.

"It can't be—— the *player* hasn't changed?"

Without stopping his use of keigo, M said feebly.

"No, I have not changed…… This is the real me…… And, if you…… right now, shoot, me……. I will die…… I will end up dying……"

'What is this guy saying?', a question mark flew in LLENN's head,

"That means that your *character* dies, you know? But, you'll only die in GGO, in SJ, you know? There's no *death penalty* in this tournament, and there're no weapon or equipment *random drops* either——"

"That is not it!"

[47] Until this point, M had been using the first person pronoun 俺 (ore), but as of this point, M begins using 僕 (boku). Both ore and boku are first person pronouns used by males to refer to themselves, though ore is more casual.

M immediately raised his head, and LLENN,

"Ugeh"

Ended up seeing something that she did not really want to see.

Tears pouring out from the eyes of the rough M. His *avatar*'s appearance was that of a *macho* guy, so the *impact* of this scene was quite something.

"„That's not it", you say, then…… what is it?"

"If, I, from this point on, die in SJ…… the *RL* me, will also truly die!!"

"…… Are you, right in the head?"

Shocked, LLENN remembered『*Sword Art Online*』, which truly became a *death game*.

If she remembered correctly, it used a device called the ≪*NerveGear*≫, and if a *character* died in-game, it was designed to unleash an electric pulse that would burn the *player*'s brain. It was like a murderous microwave oven had been placed on their heads, so she truly felt fear when she had heard the *news*.

Of course, the device they were using now, the AmuSphere, did not have such a function.

"This isn't *Sword Art Online*, so such a thing won't happen, right? Are you mistaking something, M-san?"

"……"

"Besides, you fought normally moments ago, and you were even shot——"

Having said up to this point, LLENN realised. That only one reason for

M's sudden change came to mind.

"M-san…… I don't mean to be nosy but, tell me. What was written in that letter?"

Biku, M trembled, and tears dripped out from his face. Even nasal mucus oozed out from his nose. 'They didn't have to go this far with reproducing it in a *game*', LLENN thought.

"……"

He did not say anything, instead, he slowly extended his right hand into his sleeve *pocket*, and took out the writing paper. With his head hanging in shame, he extended his right hand, and presented it to LLENN.

"You mean it's fine for me to read it?"

Kokun, seeing M's head nodding,

"Then, I'll take it, but if you make any weird moves, I'll shoot."

As she said this, LLENN slowly approached him without letting go of her aim, extended her left arm, quickly took away the writing paper, nimbly *back stepped* once again, and took her distance.

"I'm going to read it, you know? Okay?"

"Yes……"

With just her left hand, LLENN opened the writing paper. It was upside down, so she tried to rotate it, and panicked as it seemed that she would drop it.

Continuing to aim with her P90 using her right arm, she brought the writing paper in front of her with her left hand,

"I'm reading it."

And began reading the Japanese written on it.

There, written in great handwriting, as if it was an example of *pen*manship, the letter started off with the following.

『Yahou, M. In the middle of a hard fight, eh? I told you to read this after exactly 1 hour had passed and you didn't tear it, right? If you did, I'll kill you, y'know? I'll do it right away.』

Such unexpectedly unruly words were lined up. And, she now understood why M tried reading it at 15 o'clock.

The composition continued.

『You're participating in my place, so enjoy it to your heart's content in my place! This is a *game*, just something that you play! If you die in a disappointing way within an hour, I'll kill you. But, if you survive at least an hour with just the two of you, then you really are amazing. I'll pat you on the head in praise.』

Well, if he died before reading it, then he really would have died.

And so, as for the last *part*,

『If you die after this point, I will kill you after all. Suicide is out of the question too. Survive no matter what it takes. If there's no tension in *battle*, then you really can't enjoy it! Now then, enjoy it to your heart's content! Feel what life is! That's all.』

Just in case, LLENN tried looking at the back, but really was all there was to it.

She skillfully folded it using only her left hand and, for the time being,

inserted it in her waist *belt*. Drawing her left hand back to her P90, she once again aimed firmly,

"Who wrote this? …I don't even have to ask, do I…… It's Pito-san, right?"

"Th-that is right……"

"Well, somehow, it does feel like something that person would write."

Remembering Pitohui's smiling face with a tattoo, LLENN let out her honest thoughts. And then,

"But you know, „die" and „kill" are about the *game*, aren't they?"

Having made a completely sensible judgement, she told this to M.

In GGO——

Anyone would commonly use the words „shoot", „kill" and „died", but they were all referring to the in-*game* events. No one would imagine that it meant „death of an *RL* person".

Also, there were no idiots who got reality and the *game* confused and angrily exclaim, „Do you guys really know what it means to die?" or something like that.

M lifted the face of his huge bear-like build. His face sopping wet from all the tears and nasal mucus.

And then, he laughed.

"Hahahaha! You don't know a thing."

At his exceedingly creepy smile,

"Wah——"

For a moment, LLENN was at a loss for words. The contraction *Bullet Circle* overlapping M's face sped up.

"What don't…… I know?"

"How screwed up Pitohui's head is."

"……"

"When that woman says that she'll kill, she means that she will really kill in *RL*. Killing in-*game*? Ahahahaha! There is no way she would be that soft! I know that she's talking about killing in RL! And, that woman definitely knew that I would immediately realise this, that's why she wrote this letter! She says to enjoy the game for an hour, but treats me so badly! She really does adore *death games*! Even now, that woman has her heart set on that *game*! She's crazy! Ahahahaha, that's so like that woman. Ahahahahahaha!"

"……"

LLENN felt a slight dizziness.

It's great that *RL* Pitohui and M are acquaintances but then, just what is the relationship between them?

LLENN previously thought „I don't need to know"——

But now, she changed it to „I don't want to know".

She previously thought „I want to know" about Pitohui in RL as well——

But now she changed it to „I don't want to know."

Be that as it may, she had to continue her conversation with M.

"M-san…… In other words, this is what you want to say? That if you are killed in action in SJ from this point on, the *RL* you will be killed by the *RL* Pito-san?"

"That's what I've been saying!"

It was a feeble shout.

"……"

The *RL* M is an actor, and this is a very good performance——

There was still the possibility that this was true, but for the time being, LLENN pulled her finger away from the P90's trigger. As the *Bullet Circle* disappeared,

"T-thank you very much…… I was scared…… I don't want to die……"

She heard these words from M, who no longer saw the *Bullet Lines*.

"Then, why did you assume that you had to kill me?"

At LLENN's question,

"I thought…… I'd become the *leader*……"

M vaguely answered.

After thinking for about 2 seconds, LLENN asked,

"What were you going to do after becoming the *leader*?"

"I would be able to resign. Since there wasn't anything about resigning written on the letter, I thought I could use it as an excuse."

"That's so quick-witted……"

LLENN was amazed.

"But! I thought I would properly explain myself after resigning……

"Huu! Did you make light of my agility?"

LLENN said jokingly with a smile, but…

"You're right. I should have kept quiet and thrown a *plasma grenade*. I really regret it."

M answered with a serious look.

"…… Well, that aside——"

While saying that, she took the writing paper with her left hand,

"Sorry for returning it to you like this."

LLENN threw it in front of M. Then, she looked at her wristwatch. 3 and a half minutes past 15:10.

"The *scan* is probably over by now……"

Just to be sure, she took out the terminal from her left thigh *pocket*, and tried turning the *switch*, but…

"As I thought."

Only the map appeared.

The opponents had realised their position at least 3 minutes ago, and were probably in the middle of heading towards them. If this place

provided an unobstructed view, they would have probably sniped at them just like the last time.

Now's not the time for quarreling.

LLENN thought——

"Well, whatever."

And muttered.

LLENN returned the terminal to its original place. And then,

"M-san! Listen up, it's alright! I'll be fighting alone from this point on! M-san, hide somewhere so that you won't die! If I get taken down by the enemy *team*, the *leader mark* will move to you, so you can just resign! Thanks for your help until now! Cya!"

She spoke quickly, then turned back and began running.

Being vigilant just in case she was shot from the back, she immediately entered the shadow of a nearby rock, and once again dashed at full-speed.

She was not shot.

After wondering where she should head to for a moment,

"Alright! I'll go wild with all I have!"

Muttering this, she headed to the east. In other words, the direction that the enemy would be coming from.

Weaving her way through the gap between rocks, and sprinting at full-speed, LLENN touched the communication *item* on her left ear.

And then, she set the *switch* that she thought she wouldn't disable during SJ to *off*.

M, who was left alone, heard,

"Alright! I'll go wild with all I have!"

LLENN's voice in his ears.

*　*　*

Going a little back in time, at 15:11.

At the border of the *asphalt*-road-residential area and the pebble-pathed wilderness, a small military-use *truck* had stopped. The top of the truck's load-carrying tray and the side of the cab were covered in armoured plates that seemed to have been added later on.

At its side were six women, wearing matching camouflage clothes.

The first one was the over 180 *cm* tall woman, *Boss*.

There was a large *backpack* placed next to her feet. From the upper part of the *bag*, a barrel that would not fit in stuck out, but it was impossible to tell the type of gun it was.

To the right of her waist, a black, automatic pistol was placed in a *plastic holster*. With her braid fluttering, she turned her gaze to the five people who stood in a horizontal line,

"Our last prey is 2 *km* to the west! Come, let's bring them down, everyone!"

She shouted in a deep and menacing voice.

"Let's do it! *Boss*."

The first to answer was Tohma, who had sniped LLENN and was carrying a *Dragunov*. She was a slender and tall, black-haired woman, who had plenty of *magazine pouches* for her *Dragunov* attached horizontally along her waist, and only had a bulletproof plate that *covered* her chest. Her equipment allowed her to lie prone easily, a characteristic of a *sniper*.

"This is our last battle, right! I'm so psyched!"

And next was Sophie, who held a PKM in front of her body by its wide *sling*. Among the six, she was the shortest, but because of her large girth, coupled with her stern face, her appearance was like that of a *dwarf* in a *fantasy* world. Her long, brown hair was roughly gathered together behind her head.

It seemed that a giant battle axe on her back would suit her, but that of course wasn't the case. On her back was a large *backpack* with spare ammunition cases, with spare PKM barrels sticking out from the top.

"We won't be able to go wild anymore if we beat them! How unfortunate!"

That was the other PKM *machine gunner*, Rosa. She appeared to be the eldest among them, and was tall with a sturdy build. With her short, red hair and freckled face, she gave the impression of Mother Courage[48]. She had a similar *rucksack* on her back, as well as spare barrels. On the back of this *rucksack*, were three *plasma grenades* hanging down to the left and right sides.

"Well, we can worry about that after we win. Ladies."

The one who responded in a bewitching tone was Anna. She was a member who was roughly in her early twenties, and appeared to be the youngest member in this *team*. Underneath her green *knit cap* was

[48] This could be referring to Mother Courage and her Children, or a Japanese TV drama 肝っ玉かあさん

shoulder-length, wavy, blonde hair. And, she wore *sunglasses* that hid her pupils.

She was also a *sniper*, who carried a *Dragunov* with a quadruple-magnification *scope* attached, and had binoculars hanging down on her chest.

"I want to decide the end with my own blow."

The last one was Tanya. Although she had a short build, she was probably over 160 *cm* tall, and had *very short*, silver hair. With her sharp eyes and face, she looked as if she was a fox. Just like *Boss*, she had a pistol *holster* on her right waist. Boss and her were the only ones with pistols.

What Tanya was holding in her arms was a Russian-made *submachine gun* ≪PP-19 *Bizon*≫. Appearance-wise, it was smaller than the AK *series*, but its characteristic was a cylindrical „*helical magazine*" that was attached under the barrel.

It was a structure that allowed sending in bullets in a spiral, and thus use a lot of bullets. Tanya's Bizon, which uses 9x19 *mm Parabellum* bullets, could actually load 53 of them in one *magazine*. It was capable of continuous fire that surpassed LLENN's P90.

There was also a cylindrical tube attached in front of the muzzle. This was a *suppressor* that could suppress the noise of gunshots.

Thus, all the girls were equipped with matching Russian-made guns, but Russian-made small arms all had a common characteristic in GGO.

Which was—— „they were cheap for their firepower".

In one only considered firepower, they would lose to American and European-made guns, but if the „cost" *parameter* was factored in, they

would be much better. It was possible to acquire both the guns, and the bullets with not that many *credits* needed for the purchase.

GGO *players* had come up with various reasons for that.

There were opinions that „Russian-made guns were originally cheap“,

And an opinion that „This is an *American game*, thus Russian guns were unfairly treated as cheap products“.

Among the various opinions, the most realistic one was,

„Russian small arm *makers* put a low price on their *license*.“

This.

Although this was in a *game*, implementing items with their real names, whether it be cars, planes or guns, could not be done without the permission of the *makers*.

GGO, which was obsessed with perfectly reproducing small arms, from their appearance to their sounds to their firepower, had acquired all the necessary *licenses*. Even if „guns that were excavated in the future and reproduced“ was the setting.

The *license* for the Russian-made guns was extremely cheap, thus with the permission acquired, the guns were cheap in GGO, in other words, this was done to increase popularity for the guns; this was the most prominent opinion.

But then, the management company *Zaskar* has not *announced* anything, so the truth behind it remains unknown.

Moreover, the most popular weapons in GGO were, nevertheless, American and European-made ones.

"Alright! That's what I call being psyched!

Hearing the reliable and cheerful voices of her comrades, *Boss* gave a smile with her braid fluttering.

"Well, let's go! On a rabbit hunt!"

And then, Anna abruptly began singing.

" o-ishi, ka-no-yama-, o-ishi, ka-no-yama-[49]"
U - s a - g i

Among the other *members* that joined in, only Tohma asked with a serious look,

"That song…… is it „the rabbit is tasty"?"
u s a g i o i s h i i

The *dwarf machine gunner*, Sophie replied,

"No! It's „chase", so it's pursuing! But, since they're being chased, it's because they're tasty! People wouldn't be chasing them if they weren't tasty!"
o i s h i

"I see! I really do want to eat one!"

Tohma gave a smile, lagging behind everyone else.

Boss then said,

"Well, don't eat this rabbit even if we catch it. It's probably not tasty."

The five others burst into laughter.

"However, hunt with all you have! It's a rabbit that has survived till

[49] The first verse of Furusato, a Japanese children's song.

now. Make sure you don't let your guard down!"

Boss caused them to steel their faces in a moment.

"Watch out for its fangs! Let's go!"

Five voices resounded in the wilderness all together.

"Ururaaaaaaaaaaa!"

*　*　*

The *pink* rabbit,

“What do I do what do I do what do I do? What am I going to do alone? Really, what do I do?”

Ran as she muttered this.

Looking at her wristwatch, she saw that it was past 15:16. Even if they came on foot, it wouldn’t be surprising if they made contact at any moment if they ran at full-speed.

LLENN stopped running for the moment, and hid in the shadow of a large rock.

As she quickly crouched, her short, brown hair touched her cheek,

“Ah, I see……”

LLENN finally realised that her *knit cap* had been sent flying by M.

‘My favourite!’, slightly angry, ‘Well, I’m glad that it didn’t hit my face’, LLENN untied the *bandana* wrapped around her neck, and used it to cover her head.

While moving her hands, she recalled that moment, *whew*, sight in relief, and got scared at how dangerous that was.

And then—— was proud of herself.

Of how she was able to avoid being shot from such a close distance.

This body of hers that excelled in agility was wonderful. From this point on, if she clearly saw the *Bullet Lines*, or muzzles, without losing her concentration, she'd be able to do do such an amazing thing again.

Tying the *bandana* with her hands behind her back,

"Alright!"

Obviously, she felt psyched.

"Now then, the *last battle*! I'm going to show them!"

LLENN encouraged herself.

From this point on, she could only rely on herself, and her weapons.

Her weapons, first of all, included her beloved gun, her P90 P-chan. She had seven *magazines* that she could use right away. Another in *storage*. 397 bullets in total remained.

On the left side of her waist, she had 2 *plasma grenades*. She also had a *combat knife* held against her back.

First-aid *kits*—— none.

It was mostly unclear what kind of group her opponents were. However, she was certain that there were *snipers* and *machine gunners*, and, naturally, more than one of them. Moreover, they were tough fighters that had survived till now.

"Now then, the *last battle*! I'm going to show them! Well, as much as I can."

LLENN repeated.

And then,

“What should I do to make the best use of my merits……?”

She began thinking as she muttered.

‘How did I fight until now? How did I survive until now? How did I kill those five people?’

‘What do my opponents think of me? And, how will they attack me?’

“……”

Stopping her train of thoughts, LLENN looked at her wristwatch.

15:17.

“3 more minutes until the *satellite scan*……”

LLENN grasped her P90 thightly,

“Alrighty…… Let’s run!”

Kicking up the pebbles, and leaving footprints behind, she began sprinting like the wind.

Several broadcast cameras followed that gallant figure from the sky.

“It-it’s not like it’s my fault! I-I’m fine with this!”

A single man shouted in the wilderness of rocks.

"Nobody knows about how scary that woman is! That's why I can say such a selfish thing! I'm not mistaken! What's wrong with being scared of death!"

M continued continously saying such self-justifying lines, but there was no one there to listen to him.

Judging that there was no point to record this, there were no *cameras* in the surroundings either.

There was but a trail of small footprints extending to the distance in front of him.

Chapter 12 - This Last Battle of Mine

Six women advanced through the wilderness of rock and pebble.

The past 1500 hours sun could be seen to the upper left of their view, so this meant their goal was to the west.

The surroundings were obstructed by rocks, and farthest they could see was about 40 *metres*.

The short Tanya, holding a *Bizon* with a *suppressor* without letting her guard down, advanced in such a location as the *point man*, in other words, a vanguard.

She constantly kept her finger on the trigger, and the *Bullet Circle* was displayed constantly. If she encountered an enemy, she could immediately target them with the *circle*; it was like using a *laser sight*.

Tanya, with her silver hair barely fluttering, peeked forward from the shade of a rock.

"The front is clear."

After confirming that there were no enemies ahead, she called her comrades, who were behind her.

The *point man*'s task, generally speaking, was to stand in the vanguard, and report any enemies that they discovered. Of course, this was the most dangerous task, as it was a role that involved risking being the first one to be shot in an ambush.

Among the remaining five members, the *machine gunner* Sophie and the *sniper* Tohma, and likewise Rosa and Anna, had grouped up to form two-man cells, in other words, „two-in-one cells".

The two groups had positioned themselves about 30 *metres* behind the *point man*, and spread out to the right and left to protect the team's front, left and right flanks.

Behind the *team*'s centre,

"Alright. Advance 20 *metres* forward."

Boss, who would sometimes climb on a rock and peek through her binoculars, gave an order.

Without a single arbitrary action, and with minimum conversation, the group gradually advanced.

The time was 15:19:20.

"*Scan* in 40 seconds."

Boss's voice reached even Tanya.

The previous time, she had watched the rear for Tanya, but this time it was the exact opposite. *Boss* was probably glancing at the *satellite scan* terminal behind her.

During the scan, they stopped moving and watched over their surroundings. Tanya stopped moving at the side of a rock that she had been next to, and assumed a half-rising posture.

At that moment, a *pink* rabbit jumped out of the rock in front of her.

Unluckily for Tanya, *Boss*'s announcement that reached her ears diverted her attention from the light footsteps that approached her.

The moment that LLENN, who was running swiftly like a bullet, jumped out from behind a rock,

"Ah——"

She saw the figure of an enemy at the right side of a rock about 20 *metres* ahead of her.

Green camouflage, with a black gun, whose name she did not know. Short, silver hair.

"Aah!"

At any rate, she was surprised, but——

But the other party also gave an expression of complete surprise.

‘Don’t stop!’

LLENN did not slow down her run speed. If she stopped, she would only be shot. Didn’t the fact that her speed was her best defence continue to be proven in all the battles thus far?

Bullet Lines pursued LLENN’s back and——

Shukokokokokokokokoko, suppressed gunshots consecutively resounded. Bizon, which had low recoil, repeatedly swayed, and continued spitting out small, empty shells to the right side one after another.

The fired bullets tried to overtake the sprinting LLENN, but,

“Ta!”

LLENN hid in the shadow of a rock before that could happen. The swarm of 9 *mm* bullets pierced the rock.

“Ene——”

‘Enemy spotted!’, before she could say this, Tanya leaped out of the rock's shade that she had hid in. *Bullet Lines*, and at almost the same moment, P90 bullets assaulted that spot in *full auto*.

Raising a column of sand by hitting the rock.

LLENN, who shot as she leapt out from behind the rock that she had been hiding behind,

‘What, she dodged that!’

She aimed at the figure escaping to the left side of her field of vision, and discharged a full-power volley in *full auto*. She kept turning the P90's muzzle to the left, and the situation became the exact opposite of the one before. She was the one pursuing her escaping opponent now.

And, the moment she saw that her escaping opponents muzzle was pointed at her, she also began a violent *dash*.

It was as if they were clashing their *Bullet Lines*, just like in a fight with long swords.

With both of them flashing red lines out of their muzzles, it seemed like they were swinging a sword toward their sideway-running opponent.

Or a *dog fight*, where two puppies were going in circles, trying to bite each other's tail.

The boisterous gunshots of the P90, and the silent gunshots of the Bizon intersected in the open space of pebbles that was about 20 *metres* in size in every direction.

Two hit *effects* shined from Tanya's back and shoulder. While the bullets that she fired all disappeared behind LLENN.

Both guns exhausted all the bullets in their *magazines*, and silence descended. At that moment,

"Ge-"

Both LLENN,

"K~"

And Tanya ran to the closest rock.

Immediately, with machine-like reflexes, the two pulled out a *magazine* from their respective large *pouch*, and began the reload that they wagered their lives on.

Tanya, with her large *magazine*, and the large gun itself, was late by a mere moment. Just as she inserted the *magazine* and began pulling the *cocking lever* to load a bullet into the gun.

"!"

A red *Bullet Line* came to her like a *searchlight*, Tanya perceived that she was targeted, and that she didn't even have a tenth of a second to spare.

Tanya threw her beloved gun.

A moment after the Bizon that flew out of the rock shade was exposed to the *Bullet Line*, it was shot instead of her, and *orange* sparks scattered in various places of its black *body*.

While seeing her beloved gun blown away,

"One enemy! The gun is P90! Excessively quick!"

She reported to her comrades during the short gap that she had created.

At the same time, she extended her hand to the *holster* on her right waist, but the moment she finished her report and grasped the *grip*——

The small, *pink* figure jumped directly at her, and cut her body in half with a red line.

It was an incident that lasted merely 10 seconds from the beginning to

the end.

The 15:20 *satellite scan* had yet to begin.

They had run around and fired close to 100 bullets in total,

"I did it……"

LLENN had decreased the number of members in the enemy *team* by one, but at the next moment, she felt a dull pain in her left shoulder, and saw the shining hit *effects* before her eyes.

'Run!'

Due to her almost instinct-like intuition, LLENN broke into a run.

She did not see the *Bullet Lines*, but she clearly heard the sound of sand crackling, and the extremely noisy gunshots of *machine guns*.

She sprinted back from where she came at full-speed, hid behind a large rock, and this time the rock was hit. The sound was so violent that the attack of her opponent moments ago seemed like child's play.

"Uhyaa! Uhyaa!"

Without the time to enjoy the fruits of her battle or to reload her empty *magazine*, LLENN immediately began escaping.

"How dare you!"

"Uraaa!"

Sophie and Rosa, the two *machine gunners*, pounded away like crazy.

Having climbed up atop a small rock, holding their *stocks* on the right side, and holding the *carrying handle* on the top part of the guns, they fired in *full-auto* hip fire.

They understood that their comrade had made contact, and that she was defeated with no time for them to rush to her side, by looking at the *hit point gauge* at the top-left corner of their view.

And they found out about the number of enemies and gun used from the *dying message* she left behind.

They were on a rock, so they could see well. The small, *pink* figure was restlessly escaping along the shadow of the rocks.

The *sniper* Anna finished clambering up a larger rock. Standing atop it and holding her *Dragunov*, she peeked through the scope,

"Die."

And fired at the *pink* back.

However, because of its speed, she could not match the *timing*,

"Shit."

She kept missing by a hair's breadth.

"Waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

While loudly shouting, and,

'How many times has it been todaaaaaaaaaaay!"

Shouting this in her mind, she continued running away from the hail of bullets.

Her surroundings once again lit up with red lines like a *concert* hall, and with the unending roar of bullets, the sand kicked up by their impact flew in her face and into her mouth.

“Peh!”

To survive, she had to put in some distance no matter what.

She did manage to defeat that first enemy with a mix of chance and luck, but if she was caught in that extreme firepower, there probably wouldn’t be a second time.

“Hiiiiiiii!”

While giving a scream that was close to being a cry, LLENN ran and ran, and finally, after who knows how many tens of seconds of running, the world became silent.

Tanya’s corpse, with a shining 【Ｄｅａｄ】 *tag*, was lying in the shade of a rock.

In the BoB and SJ, the corpse would remain with the last expression the person had before they died, in other words, their *hit points* were completely depleted, and Tanya’s expression was a smile with closed eyes. What came to mind was the sense of accomplishment of completing a job.

Pon, while tapping her small shoulders,

"It's because she got her revenge."

Crouching with her huge build, *Boss* gave a short speech.

And then, she detached the *holster* with a pistol from Tanya's waist. And then handed it over to Tohma, who was behind her,

"You or Sophie take it. It would be nice if you got the *chance* to fire 2-3 bullets at the enemy with it."

"Roger."

Once Tohma took it, *Boss* put down her large *backpack* on the pebbled ground,

"I'll be the one that kills it in the end."

And drew out a black barrel from inside.

After all that merciless running and running away at a full-speed sprint, she no longer knew how far she had travelled.

"Haah……"

LLENN finally took a breather. Running did not take one's breath away, but it did result in extreme mental exhaustion.

LLENN hid in the shade of a large rock and stopped her small body.

First, she confirmed her own *hit points*, which she had not had the time to do while she ran. At any rate, she was sprinting at full-speed at a speed similar to a bicycle, so if she did not look forward, she would likely have crashed into a rock.

The hit on her shoulder seemed to have only been on the level of a light graze, as her *hit point gauge* was still at seventy percent. Nevertheless, it was on a level where it was possible to die from 2 or 3 shots, even if they did not hit the vitals. And she had no healing *items*.

And, even though it had probably ended, she *checked* her *satellite scan* terminal. As expected, the *scan* was over, so she returned it to her chest *pocket*.

Next, she reloaded her now empty P90 *magazine*. Although unexpected, she had wasted a lot of bullets during her unrestrained shooting, and she had used up two magazines.

She immediately operated the *storage*, materialised the last one, and put it into her *pouch*.

Even adding all of them up,

"Six of them. Only 300 bullets, huh……"

That was all that LLENN could fire in SJ.

She did take one down, but if she had to use another 100 for the next one, she naturally would not have enough of them. With all that flashy shooting, there were probably more than just three people.

"If there are five of them, then 60 bullets per person……"

If she used more than that in the battle, she wouldn't be able to do anything but resign. Though she did have two *plasma grenades* and a *knife*,

"Hmm, should I use them for suicide……"

Were her very pessimistic words.

To flush out LLENN, *machine guns* started roaring from afar.

“Uhya!”

The chills went through LLENN’s spine, causing her to jump and drop low to the ground.

This time, it was not continuous fire.

Tatatatan, *tatatatan*, bursts of about 5 bullets would repeat at one-second intervals.

“About 200 *metres* on the other side……”

While lying in the rocks' shade, LLENN remembered her training with M, and estimated the distance.

Just by knowing whether they were close or far affected her sense of security. It was a moment where she was really glad that she had undertaken that training.

She could not hear the sound of impact at all, thus she cautiously raised her body and head, and...

“Hm?”

Saw that the *Bullet Line* was high in the sky.

Probably several *metres* above her head. It seemed that the bullet that came flying, along with a sound, quickly erased the *line* in the sky.

It did not take long for her to realise that they were not aiming at her. 'Are they aiming at M then?', that probably wasn't it either.

They were simply pounding away at places where they thought the enemy might be, without aiming.

Pitohui's words *flashed back* in LLENN's head.

"LLENN-chan, even if you are at a disadvantage in a battle against people, no matter how scared you are, don't shoot randomly without purpose. Since that is like a drug that allows you to forget your anxiety, but only while shooting, you see, and it's a waste of bullets, and it only exposes that you „are scared" to the enemy that knows your position - the poorest of poor plans."

With the unending gunshots from afar, and the faint sound of bullets flying overhead as a BGM[50],

"I might still be able to win this……"

LLENN chuckled as she muttered this.

'I'm still scared, but my opponents are naturally scared as well!'

'With one of their comrades taken down, they're feeling uneasy!'

'That's why they're pounding away even though they don't know my position!'

With this self-serving conjecture, the moment that she thought she still had a chance of winning——

[50] Abbreviation for "background music"

'I still have 300 bullets as well! With 10 bullets per person, I can kill thirty of them!'

She completely changed to a *positive* attitude. She quickly stood up, and took her P90,

"Alright…… They're coming from the right."

She began advancing in a half-run towards the *machine guns* that were flashing *Bullet Lines* on her right.

It was a much more cheerful assault. It was as if the opponents' fire and *Bullet Lines* were guiding her like the Pole star, or a lighthouse.

Nonetheless, she did not let her guard down, and weaved her way through the rocks by moving quickly, then hiding, then slowly peeking out, and once again moving quickly.

She even had breathing room to enjoy the tingling sensation of tension.

'At this rate, I'll take down all the survivors alone, and might become the *hero*, no, *heroine* of SJ!'

'If I do, I'll give the deserter M, and Pito, who gave that incomprehensible order, a shock or two!'

'At a possible *hero interview*, no, *heroine interview*,

"Well, even though I was alone in the end, it was an easy victory, you know?"

I'll say that.'

Having day-dreamed thus far, she was shot from the left without a sound.

The 1st bullet hit her left arm.

Her entire arm became numb, and lost its strength.

Immediately afterwards, the 2nd bullet hit her left waist.

Luckily, it hit the P90's *magazine pouch*, making one of the *magazines* inside unusable.

While she was falling because the hit to her left waist broke her *balance*, the 3rd bullet grazed the nape of her neck.

"Gya!"

Giving a shriek at the dull pain in the upper left part of her body, LLENN nonetheless sped up. At the same time, she tried finding out where she was being shot from based on the sound——

'I couldn't hear it!'

She was astonished at this truth.

The moment she was shot was a quiet moment, exactly between the two intervals of the *machine gun*'s fire.

It was a moment where she could even hear her own footsteps.

And yet, she was suddenly hit with three consecutive attacks, and she did not hear any sounds at all.

She had even thought that, rather than being shot, she had been stabbed with a spear by someone nearby whom she did not notice, but this was not the case.

Looking at the upper left part of her body, she saw her upper arm flashing in a red hit *effect*, and her *hit point gauge* decreasing further with a *guu* sound, until it stopped at around forty percent.

As for her left thigh, a large, diagonal hole had been opened in her *pouch*,

"Ugh……"

And from it she saw a largely destroyed *magazine*. The number of bullets that she could fire - *minus* 50.

However, if the impact was even slightly off, it probably wouldn't have ended with just leg pain and damage. With her leg becoming numb, she would have tumbled, become an easy target, and be dead now.

"I-I am——"

While running away, LLENN muttered in a half tear-strained face.

"S-still *lucky*……"

"That guy has the devil's own luck……"[51]

Boss expressed thus, seeing her *pink* prey disappearing from her field of vision.

[51] The expression used here is 悪運の強いヤツ (akuun no tsuyoi yatsu). It means "lucky in a bad situation (usually the kind caused by the person themselves)".

The one who sniped LLENN from a rock shade roughly 100 *metres* away was her.

She nimbly aimed and fired at her opponent that had jumped out, but——

The 1st bullet hit her swinging left arm, preventing a hit to the heart, the 2nd bullet should have hit the waist, but she could not see the hit *effect*. It probably hit a piece of equipment and did not deal *damage*. The 3rd bullet only graze the nape of her neck.

Boss addressed the other four via the communication *item*,

"I failed in bringing the target down. It's escaping further to the south. We're switching to pursuit as *planned*. The opponent's HP isn't high, but don't let your guard down. The *pink* colour surprisingly doesn't stand out."

'Roger', hearing this, *Boss* operated the *selector* on the back of her gun's trigger, and set it to allow firing in *full auto*.

It was a gun, slightly shorter than the *Dragunov*, that could not be called beautiful even to flatter it.

Its length was about 90 *cm*. It had a *scope* and a long, twenty-round *magazine* equipped. It had the *silhouette* of an *assault rifle*. The atypical part about it was the thick cylinder covering its barrel.

This gun was also Russian-*made*, a silent sniper ≪VSS≫—— nicknamed ≪Vintorez≫.

It was a gun developed after investigating what was needed for special forces to snipe without a sound past a mid-range (about 400 *metres*).

There were two great characteristics.

The first aspect was a giant *suppressor*, which suppressed the sound of the gunpowder exploding, integrated into the tip of the short barrel. The actual barrel is very short, while the entire cylinder that looks like the barrel is the *suppressor*.

And the other aspect was that it exclusively used 9x33 *mm* rounds, which were „bullets designed specifically not to surpass the speed of sound".

The impact of ordinary bullets that surpassed the speed of sound created a plosive sound. The impact wave of the so-called *bang* gunshot would be heard at almost the same time as the explosion of the gunpowder.

Even though a *suppressor* could suppress the sound of an explosion, it would still create a plosive sound. Therefore, it would be easy to realise that someone „was under fire", but the *Vintorez* did not even have that, as the bullet speed was reduced to a subsonic level. It fired big, yet very silent, bullets.

Even if a comrade was taken down right next to someone, it would be impossible to know where they were being shot from and, in the first place, whether they were under fire at all—— that's what *Vintorez* was.

Just like how they tricked LLENN now, they would intentionally fire their *machine guns* like mad without aiming, drawing the attention of their opponents, and,

"Heheh! Those guys are panicking!"

Would invite such negligence.

And when the enemy nonchalantly and carelessly drew near——

In an area with a clear field of vision for long-range attacks, they would snipe them with the 2 *Dragunovs*.

In a narrow place with numerous opportunities for cover, they would take them down by having the quick-witted Tanya assault them with her *submachine gun*.

Or, just like in LLENN's case, *Boss* would draw near unnoticed, and take the target down with her silent sniping. Alternatively, Tanya and Boss would make a combined attack. Sometimes attacking at the same time as a *two man cell*, sometimes attacking from the left and right in a pincer attack.

In this way, the girls had been reaping victories in the SJ's battlefield thus far. Following *Boss*'s orders and instructions, in perfect *team play*.

When they had camped at the advantageous ruins, they drew in three *teams* as their opponents, and even managed to get them to fight each other at the same time.

In the end, *teams* that did not have cohesive cooperation, and used improvised formations, were no match for the girls.

'The 2 core firepower *machine guns* can't really be decoys——'

Such teams also did not notice the attackers until they were wiped out.

"So, let's finish this! Sophie's party, move to the west-southwest. Rosa's party, cover them."

The five began moving for the hunt's mop-up.

The *machine gunner* and *sniper* ordered to provide cover aimed at the direction where their enemy was, and began repeatedly shooting. By scattering *Bullet Lines* and bullets in the area, they would restrict their opponent's movement.

Meanwhile, the *team* ordered to move would advance. They would secure an advantageous *position*, in this battlefield's case, the top of a rock with a good view.

Tohma, who was the first to climb up a large rock, spotted the *pink* chibi running between rocks about 100 *metres* away.

"Spotted! Right under the sun, approximately a hundred!"

While assuming a posture with her *Dragunov*, Tohma notified her comrade. At the same time, she began shooting.

The *pink* chibi that she had glimpsed plunged and hid behind a rock. it was about 2 *metres*-wide, thus Tohma aimed at the left and right of the rock with her scope, and *tan*, *tan*, fired at regular intervals. It was her suppressing fire to ensure that the opponent did not move from there. From behind, Sophie, who was several seconds late, climbed up while holding her PKM. Confirming the impact of Tohma's *Dragunov*'s bullets,

"That rock?"

"Da!"

Sophie, who got a reply that was Russian for „Yes",

"Lend me your shoulder!"

Raised the muzzle of her PKM. Tohma stopped firing with her *Dragunov* that no longer had that many bullets left, and brought it in front of her body with a *sling*.

With her now free hands, Tohma immediately grasped the PKM's *bipod* from left and right, and placed the base of the barrel on her right shoulder. And then, she crouched.

This was a method to use a human when there was nowhere to set up the gun—— in other words, something for it to „lean against", and when the *bipod* was too low in a prone posture.

Having obtained a steady posture,

"Go to hellll!"

The female *dwarf* began shooting violently.

There were merely a bit over 100 *metres* to the rock that she chibi was hiding behind.

The *Bullet Circle* fixed on the rock, and even at its largest, only took up twice the size of the rock.

The bullets fired with a heavy and low sound became sonic blades, and mercilessly poured down on the target.

"Uhyaaaaaaaaaaaa!

LLENN shouted.

'I'm done for I'm already done for I'm done for at last I'm really done for

I'm gonna die I'm gonna die I'll be shot I'm gonna die I'm gonna die!'[52]

Today, she had been under fire from *machine guns* time after time, but she had not been as scared as she was now.

The rock that she had her back to, and was probably a good-for-nothing lump that was only several hundred *kilograms* in weight, was shaking irregularly. And, from the opposite side, it was giving an unpleasant sound of being shaved off.

And, *Bullet Lines*, as well as bullets, came flying incessantly in the surroundings, and kept raising pillars of sand, unlike waterspouts, atop the pebbles.

The gunshots could be heard clearer than ever before, as if showing off that the enemy was close. The sound of bullets piercing the air resounded from the right, left, and above.

'Can I escape……?'

There were roughly 20 *metres* till the next rock in the direction opposite to the enemies. Beyond that point, the rocks were closer to each other, thus it seemed like it would be easier to hide, but——

'It won't wooooooork!'

Bullets were relentlessly hitting the ground even there.

Right now, she would be hit the moment she jumped out, much less reaching the rock. And her *hit points*, which were but forty percent full, would undoubtedly be depleted if a single bullet hit her.

[52] There are no punctuation marks to denote breaks in the original text, imply rapid speech or thoughts. This happens several times throughout the story, so this note applies to any similarly structured sentences.

'Then, what would happen if I stayed here the whole time?'

The answer was simple. The other enemy *members* were undoubtedly closing in towards her, and would either attack from the side or throw a *grenade*, either way it was certain death. Yes, *game over*.

The next moment, she imagined that a *plasma grenade* rolled right next to her, and mercilessly exploded,

"Uugh……"

LLENN shivered lightly.

At the same moment——

'Plasma grenade[53]'

She remembered that she had them as well. She put her hand on her left waist, and found the two spheres still there.

The place where they were hanging was not even 5 *cm* away from the hole of the shot *pouch*.

Plasma grenades were cheap and very powerful, but it was too easy to use, thus it was relatively simple to induce an explosion by shooting it; this aspect was the trap that the grenades came with.

That's why everyone would hand them as far to the back of their waists as possible. Weighing the ease of instant use and safety, it was deemed that this was the *best position*. Though as for explosions caused by being shot from the side, one could only put up with that risk.

[53] Plasma grenade is written in hiragana, rather than katakana, in this case.

'If that attack moments ago had hit it, I would have died even if I my remaining hit points were at max, huh', LLENN was amazed by her good luck.

However, she now had such a scary thought specifically because she survived——

While under fire, LLENN detached a *grenade* from her waist, and stared fixedly at the black ball.

By turning the *knob* on its top, she could set the *timer* for the explosion, but by *default*, she could press the *button* and it would go *bang* after 3 and a half seconds.

If she tried to press it now, including the time it would take for her *hit points* to go down with a *guun* sound, she'd be blown out of SJ in 5 seconds, and she would probably feel easier.

"……"

LLENN's eyes became serious.

Eyeing it as if she was trying to stare a hole through it,

"I'm counting on you."

She pressed the *button*.

O~ne.

1 second had passed. Even in that time, the pebbles in the surroundings were whirled up by the impact of the bullets, and the rock continued to shake.

T~wo.

The 2nd second had passed, and LLENN threw the grenade with her hand behind her back.

Th~ree.

The 3rd second had passed, with her back turned to the rock, she assumed a half-rising posture, and prepared to *dash*.

"Ta!"

The beginning of LLENN's dash, and the explosion of the *plasma grenade* on the other side of the rock were simultaneous.

The explosion that blew away anything within a 2 *metre* radius greatly shook the heavy rock, but it could not destroy it.

However, all the bullets in the air at that moment got hit by the impact. As they were repelled upwards or sideways, their course changed——

And became a *shield* that protected LLENN's back as she began running.

"What the!"

Sophie was so shocked that she stopped shooting.

Tohma, who had become the base for the *machine gun*, clearly saw it as well.

How a bluish-white explosion erupted in front of the rock, and how it bent the course of the tracers. And how the *pink* chibi had begun running away at the same time.

Sophie slightly shifted her aim upwards and once again began pounding away, but no matter how much it seemed that the bullets would hit right next to the *pink* chibi, they didn't——

"Shit! So fast!"

And their target escaped behind a rock about 20 *metres* away. Sophie immediately halted her fire,

"The target escaped using the explosion as a shield! It's moving further to the west! The rocks there are dense! Everyone, be careful!"

"Roger! We clearly see the location of the explosion. We're about 40 *metres* to the north-east. We're in pursuit."

And received an immediate reply from *Boss*.

"Roger! We'll chase after reloading!"

Sophie took down the PKM from Tohma's shoulder, and removed the ammunition case, which probably had few bullets left, from the bottom of the gun.

Tohma opened Sophie's *backpack*, and took out another ammunition case from there.

"That guy…… is good."

While moving her hand to reload her weapon, the female *dwarf* agreed.

"Geez……. They got us a ridiculous enemy for the end."

'It worked It worked It worked It wooorked!"

LLENN did not know whether the *plasma grenade*'s explosion would become a shield against bullets or not. It was an all-or-nothing gamble.

However, having succeeded, LLENN obtained a new refuge for the time being, and still continued running.

There were plenty of rocks, thus if she *dashed* at full-speed, there was the danger that she would not be able to dodge them, and thus she considerably slowed down her speed.

And, as she ran and ran——

'What do I do?'

LLENN suddenly thought.

What would happen if she ran away.

"……"

She slowed down her run.

While strolling through the space covered in rocks, LLENN thought.

'The opponents still number at least three. Actually, I should think that there are more.'

'Their weapons are: 2 7.62 *mm class machine guns* that scatter bullets in a hail, at least 1 automatic sniper rifle that can be be used 600 *metres* away. Additionally, 1 mysterious gun that can shoot soundlessly.'

'As for me, I have a P90, which can be used 200 *metres* away at best, even

when I aim calmly, 1 *plasma grenade*, and a *knife*.'

'Huh? Doesn't this mean——'

'That by keeping my distance, I'm actually I put myself at a disadvantage in proportion to the distance?'

'I took down one of them some time ago, but how did I win? How did I manage to win?'

'No, I've slaughtered five people until now, but in what situation did I pull off such a result?'

"……"

She stopped walking.

'Close. Until now, whenever I took down anyone, I was extremely close to them.'

'That's it——'

"I can't run away……"

LLENN looked at the P-chan in her right hand.

The atypical-shaped gun painted in *pink*,

"That's right LLENN-chan! You've finally realised it, huh! Now then! Don't run away from enemies anymore! Go towards them yourself! Make the best use of your nimbleness and dexterity, and fight like LLENN-chan should! I'll be at your side, okay! No matter if we die or live, we're in this together!"

Gave such a cheerful speech, she thought, but——

She of course did not want to become a madwoman who could communicate with a gun, thus,

"No no."

LLENN deemed that it was her imagination.

"Come, let's have our final battle!"

Boss inspired her comrades and,

"Follow me!"

Naturally, she was standing in the vanguard, leading the assault towards the place where the *pink* chibi should be hiding.

If the *leader* did not face danger, no subordinate would follow. She understood that well.

From the side of the rock where the explosion occurred, a trail of the enemy's footprints was left behind. Holding her *Vintorez* at her waist, *Boss* moved in a half run, continuing the assault with maximum tension and vigilance.

From behind, at about 5-*metre* intervals, an oba-san lightly holding her PKM, Rosa, and a blonde-haired Dragunov user with *sunglasses*, Anna, followed.

Among the three, only one of them moved swiftly. Two kept their guns at the ready and were on the lookout. And, after *switching* roles, they moved out again.

It was a battle formation where one of them might be shot, but the remaining two would certainly bring the enemy down. Naturally, *Boss* was the vanguard. Without a need for words, the three skillfully repeated the *combination*.

'Now, where are you? Come out!'

Boss's grim face tensed up further, even though she did not say that, and looked almost like that of a beast. Her braid really did not suit her.

And then, the moment she began moving from one rock to the next,

"Wh-!"

Boss saw.

Merely 10 *metres* ahead. A chibi who was entirely *pink* from bandana to her clothes was sitting atop a small rock the size of a dining table, and looking at her.

The P90 in her hands aim was not directed at her. And in the first place, it wasn't even prepared for an attack.

And, the *pink* chibi was smiling. The cheerful smile looked like she had found the friend that she had been waiting for.

The moment *Boss* aligned her aim,

"Were you looking for me?"

The chibi began speaking to her in a normal manner, and, for probably not even half a second, her reaction to pull the trigger was delayed.

"Yeah!"

While answering, *Boss* swiftly shot with her *Vintorez* and,

"Ahaha!"

The chibi fell to the back at the same time.

Bullets soundlessly passed through the space where the chibi's chest was, and another between her overturned legs.

"Bastard!"

While *Boss* shouted, Rosa, who had caught up, passed her side. And dynamically discharged with her PKM *machine gun* that was held to her waist. The menacing and very low sound began resounding.

With this gun, which could shoot 100 bullets consecutively, she could scatter its bullets for nearly 10 seconds even if she fired while in pursuit.

"Oraaaaaaaaaa!"

Along with a shout that did not lose to her gunshots in loudness, Rosa assaulted towards the rock while scattering her bullets as if sprinkling water with a *hose*.

Anna, who had her *Dragunov* at the ready, followed from behind,

"Boss, take the left!"

While saying thus, she spread out to the right.

Rosa in the centre, Anna from the right, and *Boss* from the left.

Their strategy was to surround the target by two of them going around the rock, and thus settling the battle in an instant.

In this case, it was by no means a mistake but——

"Stop!

Boss shouted.

"Let's do it!"

Having descended from the rock with a back spin, LLENN firmly landed on the ground with her feet, and once again sprung up.

LLENN did not run away.

She already understood. That if she turned her back at this range, she would merely become a target.

'I won't turn my back anymore. Then what do I do?'

'I close in on them myself!'

LENN suddenly jumped on the rock that she had been sitting on moments ago. Then, she immediately leaped up with her maximum force. She made a great *jump* with all her might, with her agility being used to the limit.

While soaring in the air, LLENN saw. That below her were three enemies.

'A middle-aged woman that was making her way forward while shooting with her *machine gun*.'

'On her left was a blonde with *sunglasses* who was holding a long and narrow sniper rifle.'

'And on the right side was a rough woman who was shouting something. She's the woman who I met eyes with.'

LLENN began choosing her prey.

'Now, who should I start with?'

Boss, and Anna too, saw.

That their comrade *machine gunner* who had been pounding away, and her surroundings, were engulfed in red lines from above. And that the next moment, a column of sand was raised, and hit *effects* began shining within it.

"Gah!"

The PKM stopped shooting, and its owner's body collapsed.

A *pink* chibi descended at the collapsed Rosa's side from the sky.

"You bastard!" "Shit."

Anna and *Boss* aimed their muzzles at the chibi at the same time——

Just as they were about to pull their triggers...

Their bullets would undoubtedly hit their ally if they fired.

The *pink* chibi magnificently landed right in the middle between then, and turned forward at the next moment.

'Go to hell already!'

Anna swung her long *Dragunov* to the left, aimed at the *pink* chibi that was getting up from its spin, and fired in succession.

The bullets went through above the head of the target that began running to escape.

'He's fast! And small!'

Her target was less than 10 *metres* away, yet she could not hit it.

'I'm definitely going to bring you down here!'

Anna, who continued firing with such a thought, did not notice that the *pink* chibi's left arm suddenly waved.

Nor did she notice the black ball rolling right next to her.

"Run!"

In her final moments, she heard *Boss*'s voice.

Feeling the shock from the explosion behind her, and sprinting at full-speed, LLENN exchanged the P90's *magazine* with a new one taken out from her right thigh *pouch*.

Without the time to put away the removed *magazine* into her *pouch*, she had to drop it even though it still had 20 bullets, but there was no time to worry about it now.

With this, the number of bullets that she could fire was merely 200.

Time for checking on the fruits of her battle - none.

The thrown *grenade* had fallen right next to the *sniper*, thus she should have been taken down, probably; however, the *machine gunner* was probably not dead. Even LLENN saw that the bullets she fired from the sky were considerably off the mark.

As if to prove that, a hail of *Bullet Lines* chased after her and passed her.

Without the time for her to hide behind a rock, a hail of bullets descended on her, a dull pain ran through her left ankle, and made her fall over in a flashy manner.

Tumbling while in a full-speed dash was extremely flashy.

"Uwaaaaaaaaaaaaa."

Like a crashed airplane, LLENN kept spinning as she blew up a cloud of dust——

And finally, she hit a rock with her back and head with a thud,

"Gefuh!"

With her legs thrown out in front, she finally stopped.

As the cloud of dust dissipated,

"Ah."

LLENN saw.

Firstly, her own *hit points*. They had further decreased to below thirty percent, and the *gauge* finally turned red.

Then, her now empty hands. Her beloved gun that had been hanging in a *sling* was not in her hands. She immediately found it by touch. On her back. It was carried away by her spinning, and was now on the back of her body.

And finally, the enemy. Atop a rock about 30 *metres* ahead of her, an oba-san was standing with several hit *effects* throughout her body, and a demon-like expression. She had her massive *machine gun* held on her shoulder, and the *Bullet Lines* springing from her muzzle extended to LLENN's face, head, arms and legs.

'She's probably angry.'

'With two of her comrades killed, and several holes in her own body, it was impossible for her not to be angry.'

Time for taking out the P90 hanging from her back - none.

Time for folding her extended legs, standing up and running away - also none.

Bullets would be coming at her soon, thus LLENN stared blankly, as if this was her death, and last scene in SJ.

And then she noticed that 3 *plasma grenades* each hanging down from the right and left sides of the oba-san's *backpack*; totaling six.

'If only but 1 bullet from my fire moments ago had hit it!

LLENN lamented her bad luck, but——

'Ah, in that case, I would have also been engulfed in a chain explosion and died.'

'I really was *lucky*', she reconsidered. 'My last thoughts before death being this is ironic, huh.', she thought.

The next moment, instead of bullets,

"Well played! Shorty!"

Such were came towards her.

It seemed that the *machine gun* oba-san wanted her to hear her speech in her final moments.

'Okay, I'll listen, y'know?'

It seemed that she could extend her lifespan—— by seconds or tens of seconds with this. She might even have the opportunity to take out her P90.

"Now then, die!"

It only took 3 seconds.

'You could have talked a bit more. You could have spoken your heart out.'

With such thoughts, LLENN absent-mindedly looked at the face of the person who was now going to kill her.

And that person exploded.

Everyone one saw it.

How the person holding a *machine gun* was engulfed in multiple bluish-white lights.

Obviously LLENN, as well as *Boss*, who was diagonally downwards right next to her.

Tohma, who had her *Dragunov* at the ready to support her comrades, and Sophie, who was holding a PKM, also saw it from the top of a rock that was about 40 *metres* away.

And——

And another person, who was the farthest away, as well.

As an extreme sound of explosion roared through the world——

The first to completely realise what had happened was LLENN.

Those were the explosions of the *plasma grenades* on the woman's waist, and they were induced by shooting.

There was but was conceivable cause for it.

LLENN placed her hand on her left ear, and re-activated the *item* there.

And then, she enquired.

"Are you going to participate now? M-san."

The answer immediately reached her.

"Just around the *last battle*."

Chapter 13 – Battle to the Death

Boss, who saw her comrade disappear in an explosion, had her large figure blown away by the aftereffect.

There had been 6 *plasma grenades* hanging down from Rosa's waist, and due to bad luck, 1 of them was sent flying by the initial explosion, and exploded as it drew near Boss. Without the time to avoid it, she had been dealt *damage*. Her large figure was blown away by about 3 *metres*, and she stopped as she fell on her backside on the pebbles.

"Shi~it! Using the *leader* as a decoy, as if that's normal!"

Swearing at the fact that she was completely fooled, she promptly and energetically got up, and confirmed the damage.

Her *hit points* were at sixty percent. She was still okay.

However——

"K~!"

There was even greater *damage*. Her beloved gun *Vintorez* was not in her hands.

Tanya and *Boss* frequently engaged in close-range battles, thus, desiring a degree of freedom for the movement of their guns, they did not use *slings*.

This time, this approach backfired. The gun was blown away by the blast.

Of course, she would probably find it if she searched the surroundings, but she did not have the time for that.

Boss drew out a black pistol from her right waist *holster* without hesitation.

It was a planar-*form* automatic pistol. A 9*mm* pistol, Russian-made of course, that was manufactured by *Arsenal Firearms* and called ≪Strizh≫, Russian for „swift“[54], and it was called „*Strike One*“ in export specifications.

Tightly grasping the gun with a 17 bullet *magazine*, in her right hand, *Boss* sent instructions to her two surviving comrades.

“There’s a sniper to the north-west! Don’t climb on rocks!”

The reply from the *machine gunner* Sophie,

“Roger! We’re heading towards you!”

And the *Dragunov*-wielder Tohma,

“I’ve been shot too!”

Were these.

In other words, this meant that she intentionally kept exposing herself on a rock even after the explosion, tempting the sniper to shoot her. And, after she got hit by the sniper, she was somehow still alive.

“*Line* from the north side! The distance - at least two hundred!”

Being a *sniper*, she was able to grasp that solely based on the *Bullet Line*, and conveyed this beneficial information to *Boss*.

[54] Refers to the Apodidae family of birds.

"Alright! Everyone, let's take down the chibi! Surround it!"

"Sorry, LLENN. I failed to take down the *sniper*."

"That's alright!"

LLENN stood up as she answered to M. She pulled the *sling* and brought her P90 in front of her body.

She did not have the time to talk leisurely. There was still an enemy in the shade of a rock about 30 *metres* in front of here, and the enemy should be heading towards her. Because that is what she would do.

No longer minding the other two who were nearby, LLENN broke into a run.

It was an extreme *dash* towards the enemy, with the resolution of colliding into them. As she ran, the rocks kept moving to the back of her vision as if they were soaring, and what came out from the shade of one of the rocks,

"Uooooooooo!"

Was a large woman with a shouting expression who was aiming a pistol at her.

Squeezing the P90's trigger, LLENN continued her assault. By drawing near, she kept moving below the bullets and thus kept dodging her opponent's line of fire.

She saw her own bullets heading for the huge woman's legs, but this woman was not a weak opponent that could be taken down that easily.

'In that case, I'll shoot you up even if I have to run into you!'

LLENN, who continued charging while dodging bullets,

“Don’t make light of me!”

Saw that the huge woman was raising her big and long leg. And, that it was heading for her like a slanting log.

“Guhya!”

Giving a tiny scream, LLENN was kicked up. While soaring in the sky——

‘I can’t let her go that easily!’

LLENN put all of her energy solely into the hand grasping her P90.

And then, the small body that flew in the air,

“Boheh!”

Landed on one of the rocks.

What LLENN had fallen on with her back was a flat and wide rock that was at least 2 *metres* high. ‘Just how far was I blown away?’

“Ugaah……”

She did not feel any sharp pain, but due to the feeling of her back being pressed with a thump, she couldn’t help but be in agony for about 2 seconds.

When LLENN finally tried standing up, her right hand,

Gorih.

Was stepped on by a big leg.

The right leg of the huge woman that ran up to the top of the rock, and still had hit *effects* shown——

Pinned down her arm with the P90.

LLENN's hand and P90 were fixed onto her stomach as if held in a vise. Her right hand could not be moved, and her stomach hurt. As if she had overeaten.

"I have you now!"

As the roaring huge woman was backlit, LLENN could not see her face, but——

'I'm glad that I can't see her It's probably scary Probably like an Asura.[55]'

She was able to think calmly.

"The finishing move!"

The huge woman's right arm had turned towards her.

It was grasping a black pistol. She saw a red *Line* coming from it, and it was fixed on her left breast, exactly where her heart was.

Dadadan

Three, consecutive, merciless and high-speed shots.

'Even though you didn't need to shoot that much, I would have died from 1 shot. A waste of bullets.'

[55] Asura (阿修羅) are lowest ranks of the deities or demigods of the Kāmadhātu. The expression like an Asura means "with berserker-like fury".

With such a thought, LLENN felt the impact shaking her body.

And, 'It's less painful than I thought', she had this thought as well.

It was an attack on her heart, and yet it only felt as if her chest was *knocked* on with a *tontonton*. 'Perhaps the pain is no longer being reproduced since I died from the first bullet?'

That was not it.

Looking at her *hit point gauge*, she saw that although it was red, it was still the same as it was moments ago. She had been hit by 3 bullets, and yet it hadn't decreased at all. Speaking of which, she did see any hit *effects* either.

'How?'

"Aah?"

It seemed that her enemy-san was more surprised than her,

Dan, *dan*, *dan*, *dan*.

This time, she slowly fired four times consecutively, at her chest of course. LLENN clearly saw how the *slide* quickly made round trips, and each time an empty shell was thrown out and glittered.

And still, she did not die.

"Is this guy invulnerable? A cheat?"

'That can't be the case you know?'

LLENN tried answering to the question, but——

Before she did, she realised. She remembered. What was in the left chest

pocket of her combat uniform.

It was the *satellite scan* terminal——. An indestructible *object*.

"Shhit! What, a *protector*!"

'No, that is not it, though the result is the same.'

"Then——"

The *Bullet Line* rose from her chest. It was fixed on her right eye, and the world was dyed in deep red,

"Hyah!

LLENN twist her neck to the left. A 9*mm* bullet that grazed her right ear pierced the rock behind her.

Another *Line*. This time, she twisted her neck to the right. She heard the sound of impact right next to her left ear.

And then, the huge woman drew her pistol closer. At LLENN's forehead, merely about 20 *cm* away.

She avoided those 2 bullets, but she was done for with the next.

LLENN's resolution to die for the umpteenth time today,

"Wh—— Shit!"

Was once again wiped out by the huge woman's surprised words, and by the disappearance of the *Bullet Lines*.

The pistol thrust at her, specifically, its slide stopped at the back.

When an automatic pistol is in such a state, it means that that a common

phenomenon around the world has occurred. Namely, either a load failure, or the gun has run out of ammo.

In this case, it was the latter. The huge woman had fired too much.

Having accustomed to the backlighting, LLENN saw the body of the huge woman. While pinning her down with her right foot, the woman reached for the *pouch* on her left thigh with her left hand as she removed the empty *magazine* from the pistol with her right.

It was obvious that she was trying to take out a spare *magazine* for her pistol and reload it, and if this was allowed, 10 bullets or more would probably descend on her face this time.

'Yeah. I won't let you.'

'But, what do I do? What can I do?'

LLENN used the weapon that she could use.

She moved her sole free, left hand and swiftly pulled out a long P90's *magazine* from her left thigh *pouch*, and,

"Taah!"

With a yell, she threw it with all her might.

The massive *magazine* filled with bullets collided with the huge woman's left hand,

"Wh!"

And sent the pistol *magazine* in it flying below the rock.

"Another one."

LLENN pulled out a second *magazine*, and threw it at the huge woman's face this time . The long *magazine* that turned sideways collided with the woman's eye,

"Kyah."

And forced a cute scream, which reminded LLENN that the *player* was female, out of her.

As expected, the force in her right leg loosened. LLENN put all her might into swinging her right hand, forcing the large figured to sway, and fall backwards——

"Sh-"

However, by only stumbling a step or two, she stopped.

Using this gap, LLENN rolled to the left to escape, then got up to jump, and then she extended her right hand and thrust the muzzle of her P90 towards the huge woman who was about 2 *metres* in front of her.

"Taah!"

She fired all the remaining bullets in *full auto*.

Burararararararararararararara.

The ten-odd bullets that remained in the magazine were immediately fired out.

Meanwhile, only the first 5 bullets landed a hit. On the huge woman's left arm and hand.

"Haah?"

LLENN was shocked.

Even in her dreams she wouldn't have thought that person who would do such a thing existed.

The huge woman discerned that she would not be able to dodge the attack, thus she made her own attack. And so, she extended her left arm towards the P90 muzzle.

And, she tightly grasped the tip of the barrel that was spewing out flames as the gun fired, and forcibly shifted the line of fire to the left. The P90 discharge continued, but all the remaining bullets were soaked up by the ground below the rock.

On the same rock, LLENN who had extended her left arm with her P90, and the huge woman who grasped its tip with her left hand——

Stood still in that posture.

"D-doesn't it hurt a bit?"

LLENN reflexively enquired. Even though it did not hurt as much as in *RL*, it should have been considerably hard on her senses when that many holes were opened in her left arm.

The woman with her left arm and hand dyed in bright red by the hit *effects*,

"Well, I forgot over the excitement. Though I'm not at all filled with strength."

With a rough face, she answered in a feminine tone. And then,

"Hey pipsqueak. What's your name?"

"LLENN. ——And you?"

"Eva. ——Everyone calls me *Boss* though."

LLENN exerted more strength in her right hand in an attempt to pull out her P90 from the hands of the huge woman.

Boss continued grasping it with her left hand, which should be becoming numb, with no intention to let her do so. If her hand had not been shot, she would have probably torn the P90 away a long time ago.

With both of them exerting strength, their bodies continued to sway repeatedly. As the two moved their feet to maintain their *balance*, they kept turning as if they were *dancing*.

LLENN attempted to extend her left arm towards her right thigh, but her hand did not reach the *pouch*. Even if she could draw out the *magazine* inside, she did not know whether she would be able to insert it into her P90.

"Out of ammo, huh."

Boss gave a fiendish smile.

While thinking what kind of expression she was showing herself, LLENN,

"The same goes to you."

Replied to her opponent, who was holding a pistol with zero remaining bullets in her right hand, and could not reload her magazine as her left hand was busy.

'At this rate, as time goes by, *Boss*'s left hand will recover its strength,

and I'll be the one at a disadvantage.'

The moment LLENN had that thought, an even more unfavourable event occured.

" *Boooss*!"

In the right edge of her field of vision, she saw a woman holding a *machine gun* atop a rock about 20 *metres* away.

The woman who was large in width held her PKM in hip fire position,

"Shitt!"

And did not fire. No, she could not fire. Because, if she unleashed the firepower of that gun at this moment, she would quite obviously hit *Boss* too."

"Just fire already!"

Boss shouted.

With this, she seemingly resolved to take down the enemy along with an ally, but nevertheless, she raised her *machine gun* from the hip position to adjust her aim even if only a bit.

The just under 2 second delay until she fixed the gun to her shoulder became the chink in her defence.

LLENN saw.

How a large spark scattered on the right flank of the woman who was aiming her *machine gun* at her, no, them.

Gain, it made a loud sound as if something metal was being pierced, and her orientation was forcibly changed to the left.

It was undoubtedly M's *Bullet Line*-less sniping.

The 2nd bullet came flying, and hit the staggering woman, specifically her right flank, and a hit *effect* began shining.

"K~!"

Having fallen to her knees downcast and no longer moving from that position, the woman, who became a mere target for the third shot, extended her right hand to the *holster* on her waist.

And took out the pistol that Tanya had originally used, the same Strizh as Boss's——

Specifically, she only hastily took out its *magazine*, and,

"Use it!"

Mustering her last remaining strength, she threw it.

The moment that the small *magazine* left her hand, the bullet that M fired pierced her head.

The body and *machine gun* that no longer had any strength tumbled down the rock. And then, a 【Ｄｅａｄ】 *marker* lit up.

The *magazine* that had been cast away went through the air while slightly spinning, and with splending *control*, it came flying towards the spot where the two were holding their ground.

As she saw this——,

'How many seconds until she grasps it with her left hand, inserts it into her pistol, aims it at me and fires? No, how many tenths of a second until then?'

LLENN thought. Because *Boss* right in front of her was obviously going to do that.

At the same time, it was her *chance*. If only the woman's left hand went away, she could immediately transfer the P90 to her left hand, draw out a *magazine* from her right thigh with her right hand, and reload——

In that case, it would be a match of lightning speed.

But, LLENN had confidence. In her raised agility and dexterity, and in her reloading abilities that she had practised time and time again.

'I can do it! I can win this!'

With such a thought, she continued exerting strength into her right arm for whenever *Boss* would take her hand away, but,

"That won't work, pipsqueak."

The opponent right in front of her laughed with a broad grin, and LLENN felt that more strength was put into the woman's left hand that was recovering from numbness——

'She can't be?'

Considering the possibilities of what *Boss* wanted to do, LLENN doubted her sanity. 'She shouldn't be able to do it.'

The *magazine* came flying through the air.

Boss pointed the bottom of the pistol in her right hand in the direction that the magazine was coming from. And then, she slowly twisted it——

'No way? She can't be serious?'

The *magazine* that flew towards them as it spun went towards the pistol that *Boss* had spun accordingly——

'Impossible!'

Shakon, the magazine was splendidly absorbed by the gun.

Boss's thumb lowered the *slide stop lever*, and the *slide* returned as it loaded a bullet.

As LLENN saw this scene, she wondered 'Who are these guys in *RL*?'.

Based on the display of a magnificent *juggling technique*——

Nothing but a street performer came to her mind, and „it's the audience's etiquette to pay a bit of money after seeing a performance", this fact, which was completely irrelevant at the moment, crossed her mind.

Boss finally let her left hand loose from the P90.

And LLENN's body, who had been pulling it, fell backwards. At the same time, *Boss*'s right hand moved, and pointed the muzzle at LLENN's stomach.

"Go"

It appeared that the world,

"to"

And *Boss*'s mouth,

"hell"

Were moving slowly.

"now!"

'Ah I'm already done for I'm really going to die I've forgotten how many times I've said this but I'm finally done for It's the end.

As LLENN thought thus,

"Don't give up! I will protect LLENN-chan!"

She felt that she had heard someone's voice.

No, she clearly heard it.

Aiming at the abdomen of the small body right in front of her, *Boss* pulled the trigger of her *Strizh*.

She no longer went easy.

She unleashed all 16 bullets at the stomach rather than the chest without restraint. The sound of discharge, that reverberated as if it was made by a *submachine gun*, resounded, and empty shells shined in midair in short intervals.

"How's this!"

Boss was confident in her victory this time.

The *pink* chibi slipped into the smoke from the discharge of her gun, and disappeared.

But nevertheless, she did not let her guard down, and as she dropped the used up *magazine*, her left hand had took out the spare *magazine* that she was unable to get moments ago, and attempted to insert it into her *Strizh*,

"Eeh?"

At the sight of a human figure slowly swaying, she stopped her action.

"How dare you——"

The *pink* chibi… was alive.

Even though she bombarded her „stomach" that much.

"How dare you——"

Hearing a voice that sounded like it was rising from the bottom of hell,

"HOW DARE YOOOOOU——"

Boss saw.

That her opponent had not died yet, and that the *pink* P90 that she was holding in her arms had become a tattered wreck.

And she heard a yell.

"DO THAT TO P-CHAAAAAAAAAAAN!"

She did not understand what that meant.

LLENN had thought.

'Why did I use P-chan as a shield?'

In SJ, there were no weapon *random drops*, thus she had believed that there would be no way to lose her beloved gun, but everything has exceptions.

Although it hardly ever occurred, if excessive damage was dealt to a gun during a battle, the gun's durability would be exceeded, and it would fall into to an irreparable state—— in other words, it was possible to lose it.

'I knew that, I understood that, and yet I used it to shield me.'

'In order not to die, in order to win the *game*.'

'And, for the time being, I haven't died.'

'But, P-chan has died.'

"How dare you how dare you HOW DARE YOOOOOU——"

'Mhm, I'm going to beat that woman in front of me to death.'

"DO THAT TO P-CHAAAAAAAAAAAN!"

Boss was overwhelmed by the chibi's bloodshot eyes glaring at her, and just as she was about to insert the *magazine* into her *Strizh*, she stopped her hand.

The P90's wreckage fell and scattered on the rock,

"I see…… So you used it to *guard* yourself, how magnificent!"

She expressed her honest words of admiration.

And then, she finished inserting the *magazine* to the end, and shut the *slide*.

'Even though I'm being praised, it's not like I'm happy about it; mhm,

I'm going to kill that woman.'

That day——

Karen desperately stopped her welled up desire to shoot the cute high school students.

'But there's absolutely no need to hide it now. Instead, I'll kill her quickly.'

While having such a thought, LLENN saw that *Boss* had finished her shooting preparations.

And, she thought.

'I don't have a weapon anymore, but I'll bring her down even if I have to bite her. Where do I have to bite that *Boss* to have her *hit points* decrease?

On that subject, she felt that she had received a vulgar *lecture* about that from M.

'When was that?'

'Was that on Friday?'

No, that was wrong. It was today. And moreover, not even 2 hours had passed since then.

At this moment, she finally remembered what she was taught.

The moment that *Boss* fixed the pistol's aim on her,

LLENN kicked up the earth while keeping an eye on the *Bullet Line*.

"Why you-!"

Boss aimed and fired her *Strizh* at LLENN who suddenly charged at her.

However, the small and fast LLENN swiftly slipped through her aim, and somehow slipped below her crotch, and disappeared behind her.

Drawing her *Strizh* near her body so that it would not be stolen, she turned around,

"Don't screw around! If you think you can run away——"

As she said this, she saw that the world had slanted slightly. She could not exert the strength in her left leg as she wanted. And *Boss*,

"Wh——?"

Saw that her *hit point gauge* was decreasing with a *guun* sound.

Looking at her left thigh, she understood. A long and narrow bullet hit *effect*—— no, it wasn't a bullet hit. It was a long, long, long and narrow wound.

'I was cut?'

She immediately raised her eyes, and saw that a black and atrocious *knife* held in a reverse grip,

"Shaah!"

Was being held by the figure who was once again charging towards her.

Their battle with the top of the rock as the *stage*,

'Shitt!"

Was continuously observed by Tohma for some time now.

She was lying on her stomach on a rock that was merely about 50 *metres* away, and had her *Dragunov* at the ready.

There was no *scope* on that *Dragunov*.

It was removed, dropped at the side of the rock, and had its objective *lens* smashed.

Moments ago, she had leaned out atop of a large rock to confirm the position of the enemy *sniper*, and she saw. That for a mere moment, a figure had fixed its aim exactly on her and fired. For some reason, she could not see the *Bullet Line*, but she did see the shining muzzle.

The next moment, her *scope*'s field of vision *blacked out*. Being pushed by the gun, she tumbled down the rock, and realised the cause. It wasn't her that was hit, but her *scope*, and it became useless.

Her spine went cold at the opponent's accuracy and speed, but thanks to this, her life was spared. Tohma quickly detached the *scope* and the *cheek pad* for the *scope*,

"I'm not done yet!"

Stuck her head out from another small rock from a low height, and, using normal metal sights equipped on the *Dragunov*, she began covering *Boss*.

When the *pink* chibi was kicked and sent flying atop a rock, Tohma immediately took aim, but,

"K~!"

She could only stop as *Boss* ran up there.

50 *metres* was a distance where she could blow away the target's fingertips if she had a *scope*, but with ordinary sights, she could not aim that well.

And so, Tohma continued observing their battle to the death from afar without getting to shoot.

If she carelessly shot, there was the risk that she would hit *Boss*, who had a far bigger body.

And even if she hit the *pink* chibi, there was also the possibility that the bullet would pierce her and deal *damage* to *Boss* as well.

As she could not allow the *Bullet Line* to become a hindrance, Tohma took her finger away from the trigger, and the *Bullet Circle* disappeared from her vision as well.

And so, the moment of not being able to do anything but watch the battle continued——

When *Boss* got a *magazine* from a comrade and made the *pink* chibi eat the pistol's ferocious rapid-fire, she was confident that they had won.

Having endured that much close-range rapid fire, she probably did not have any *hit points* left.

However——

'H-how? Are you a *zombie*eee!"

Seeing the *pink* chibi moving once again, Tohma felt fear from the bottom of her heart.

"Taaaah!"

Towards the charging LLENN,

“Stop screwing around!”

Boss fired; however, she missed once again.

LLENN quickly dodged, as if she was avoiding a punch, charged under her crotch, and came out on the other side. While cutting her inner femoral artery.

“Guh!”

This time, her right thigh was cut, and her *hit points* decreased again. It finally went into the yellow *zone*.

‘A blade fight huh!’

Boss understood the essence of this fight.

She herself had a gun, but it was no longer a battle of guns.

The broadcast of the third BoB crossed her mind. At that time too, the battle to the death that was nearly the *last* one turned into a sword against sword fight.

The *pink* chibi brandishing a *knife* right in front of her could see the *Bullet Lines* of her *Storizh*. As the bullets would fly there, she could just avoid them thinking of them as slash attacks.

And, in regards to agility, the opponent was far better.

Her large-framed self brandishing a long sword, and her opponent charging with a *knife*, which had a short *reach*, but it was impossible to tell where it was aimed at.

'In that case!'

Turning around, *Boss* changed tactics.

Having slipped under the crotch the second time, LLENN,

'One more attack! No, however many it takes!'

Turning around, she saw *Bullet Lines* extending from the pistol in *Boss*'s right hand.

'That much I can just dodge.'

'Unless they touch my body, I won't be hit.'

With the battle having unfolded thus far, LLENN no longer had any hesitation.

'I'll avenge P-chan."

With just this thought, LLENN held up the *knife* in her right hand over her head, and began her third assault,

'Eeh?'

She saw that *Boss* transferred the pistol to another hand.

And let go of the *grip* from her hand, grasping the front of the gun with her left,

"Uraa!"

Followed by the start of a swing towards her.

She was going to strike with the pistol as if it was a *hammer*.

As LLENN had begun her assault, she could no longer stop. She did not know where the *Bullet Line*-less blow would go until the very last moment.

When she realised that the attack was aimed at her right hand, it was already too late to lower the hand or draw it in——

'If I lose my *knife*, it's over.'

LLENN opened her hand with all her strength.

Boss's pistol blow hit LLENN's right wrist——

And, *gori*, made a nasty sound of a bone being hit. Her right arm was sent far outward.

The *system* acknowledged that the *damage* was enough to break a bone, and made a hit *effect* flash from her wrist, while her *hit point gauge* dropped quickly. Ten percent remained.

'I repelled the *knife*!'

As *Boss* had this thought, she saw.

That the *knife* was floating in the space between LLENN and herself.

And that LLENN's left hand extended to it, and tightly grasped the *grip*.

'I see, so she released the *knife* herself before the blow, huh!'

A feeling of admiration towards her opponent came to *Boss*'s mind,

"Haha!"

And she spontaneously let out a laugh.

LLENN firmly grasped the *knife* in a reverse grip, and lightly *jumped*.

From left to right, the huge neck of the person giving a smile,

"Taah!"

Was sliced in a straight, horizontal line.

The moment that LLENN landed, the giant figure fell to its back, and a 【Ｄｅａｄ】 *marker* began shining.

"You bastard!"

Tohma no longer had a reason to hesitate.

She raised the upper half of her body from the rock, touched the *Dragunov*'s trigger with her finger, producing a *Bullet Circle*, which she fixed perfectly on the chibi's body, and

"Die."

She pulled the trigger.

"Drop to the ground!"

At the shout that came to her left ear——

LLENN moved her body before she could even think.

A *Dragunov*'s bullet roared as it passed by, merely 10 *cm* above LLENN's body lying close to the ground atop the rock.

"Uhii!

LLENN gave a scream.

Right after she heard the *Dragunov*'s gunshot,

"I'm right here! Enemy-san!"

She heard this voice, and *dokadokadokan*, three loud and consecutive gunshots. LLENN turned her head and faced the direction that the gunshots came from,

"Eh, M-san?"

Wasn't that M boldly standing up atop a large rock 150 *metres* away? She only saw a small figure, but that large build and camouflaged clothes were undoubtedly M's.

"Hey, M-san! Hide! ——Won't you end up dying if you die?"

M did not answer her words.

"Nice guts!"

Tohma stood up.

Facing the huge man who showed up to provoke her, she bared her canines, and pointed her *Dragunov* at him, aligning the *Bullet Circle* on his large abdomen.

The two *snipers*,

Glared at each other a short distance of merely 200 *metres* away,

Both of them prepared their respective guns, and discharged at the same time.

The bullets quickly approached and passed by each other——

And hit each other's abdomens.

The two bodies fell down from the rocks.

LLENN clearly saw how the big one fell.

Hearing a gaudy *fanfare*,

『ＣＯＮＧＲＡＴＵＬＡＴＩＯＮＳ！！ＷＩＮＮＥＲ ＬＭ！』

LLENN ran under the capital letters flashing in the sky.

LLENN violently *dashed* to the vicinity where M had been and had fell after being shot,

“Aah!”

And found M’s large build lying upside down,

“M-sa—— Ugyaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!”

She gave a loud scream after witnessing that his neck had twisted one hundred and eighty degrees.

M’s face was at the side of the *backpack*.

And then, his eyes looked at her ,

“Higyaaaaaaaaaaaaa!”

LLENN thought that her *hit points* would decrease out of shock and that she would die.

“Stop making so much noise. What’s wrong?”

“GYAAAA! IT TALKED! MONSTEEEEEEEEEEEEER!”

“Who?”

“M-SAN BECAME A MONSTEEEEEEER!”

"What are you saying?"

M stood up via his back side,

"GYAAAAAA——, huh?"

In the midst of her scream, LLENN finally realised. That the orientation of M's face and limbs wasn't actually unusual.

The unusual thing was the *backpack*'s orientation. M wasn't wearing it on his back, but his stomach instead, and there was a small hole open in the middle of the backpack.

"W-what…… So you used it as a *guard*……"

With the loud *fanfare* as the BGM, LLENN feebly muttered,

"Because, I…… absolutely didn't want to die."

M said with his rough face.

Match time: 1 hour 28 minutes.

The first *Squad Jam* was over.

Winning team - 『ＬＭ』.

Bullets fired in total during the tournament: 49,810.

Chapter 14 – Later Developments

Having been engulfed in light, the placed that they were transferred to was the initial standby *area*.

The characters 『Winners!』 was flashing in the small space. As for the match results, the time of each *team*'s annihilation or resignation was listed.

The topmost was, of course, themselves, ≪LM≫.

Below was ≪ＳＨＩＮＣ≫. 'Shinku?' LLENN couldn't make sense of it, but they were terrifying opponents in any case.

And below them were——

LLENN stopped following the remaining results, and looked at her own figure.

Her combat uniform, which had been covered in dust just moments ago, became sparkling clean, and her dropped *knit cap* was placed right next to her.

However,

"P-chan……"

The figure of her beloved gun, which was acknowledged to have be destroyed, was nowhere to be found. As if it was even confirmed that no usable parts remained, the gun's fragments were not present either.

" *Bye-bye*……"

As she muttered, to her right,

"Aah……"

The large man sat down with a thump as he sighed. It didn't really happen, but LLENN felt as if the earth shook at that moment.

"Nice work, M-san. We survived, right?"

"A-ah, yeah……."

M raised his head as he took off his *bush hat*.

The stern face that looked like an RL brown bear's when they had met now looked like that of a teddy bear to LLENN.

M operated with his left hand, brought out a *window*, and took off most of his equipment in an instant. The M14 EBR that had slaughtered who knows how many targets, the *backpack* that had protected him from who knows how many bullets, and the HK45 that was fired at LLENN, all of them disappeared one after the other.

What remained was a *macho* man dressed in the bottom half of his combat uniform and a T-*shirt*.

LLENN followed him as well; first, she materialised a *robe*, and under it she took off all of her equipment and changed to her green clothes.

There was a huge numeral *countdown* in the space in front of them, and, 110, 109, 108, it continued to decrease. Underneath it,

『The *Squad Jam* has ended. Would you like to *log out*? Or would you like to return to the bar? In case neither is chosen, you will be returned to the bar.』

Were these characters.

If she returned to the bar, LLENN would be treated as the victor. She would undoubtedly get befitting praise from the audience that watched the broadcast, and she would be caught in a barrage of questions,

"I've…… had enough going wild and am really tired."

LLENN operated the *log out* option, and she only needed to press the „Ｙｅｓ" *button*.

"Boku
Ｍｅ ……too…… I dislike clapping and cheering too, so I'll be going off too."

Hearing M's answer,

"You use „boku" in *RL*, huh. M-san."

"Huh? Ah, yeah…… Honestly speaking, using „ore" in this world is very exhausting…… Boku is, better."

"Well, either way, we survived, right?"

"A-ah, yeah…… Hey, erm…… you see……"

Seeing M looking up at her apologetically,

"Why did you come to save me in the end?"

LLENN impishly asked.

M answered.

"Because it was safer for me."

At his blunt and frank words, LLENN unintentionally gave a wry smile.

And then,

"The scary Pito-san in *RL* will also approve of this! All's well that ends well!"

LLENN said as if trying to take the initiative, and smiled sweetly.

"Th-that would be nice……"

LLENN didn't know what kind of relationship the two had, or how serious that usual „I'm going to kill you in *RL*" letter was.

She didn't know, but seeing as they survived this far, even Pitohui probably couldn't complain. It was a great result.

Speaking of results——

"That reminds me, we ended up winning but…… it seems we could get something for it, right?"

She remembered something that was written in SJ's *rule book*.

That the top three *teams* would get a prize. She did not know what that would be though.

It wasn't a grand tournament like the BoB, and it was sponsored by an individual, so LLENN didn't think that it would be something that was worth looking forward to, and moreover, she didn't think that she would get into the top three, so LLENN hadn't cared about it.

"Huh? Ah…… Victory prize, huh……"

M answered with absolutely no interest as well,

"Seeing as we survived…… I don't really care if we do get one."

Looking down on M who seemed to be honestly thinking that,

"True, there's no better prize than that."

LLENN said.

“Though probably…… we’ll probably be sent a *catalogue* later on, like in the BoB.”

“Like a hikidemono[56] in weddings, huh. ——Speaking of which, I wonder if Pito is receiving one at this moment?”

“Possibly.”

“I wonder if there will be a P90 in that *catalogue*……?”

To LLENN, who muttered knowing the answer,

“Probably not. ——In either of them.”

M answered honestly.

“Right……”

And with this, their conversation was over, and after a few seconds of silence,

“Well, I’m going off then. See you for the review meeting.”

“Ah, yeah.”

“Send my regards to Pito-san!”

LLENN pressed the „Ｙｅｓ“ *button* as she said thus.

*　*　*

[56] A hikidemono (引き出物) is a gift that the newlywed couple give to each of the guests attending their wedding reception. Lately, people have been giving catalogues as a hikidemono so that the guest could choose the gift they want to ensure that nobody would be dissatisfied by their gift.

The next thing that entered Karen's five senses as she was looking at the ceiling through the *clear part* of her *AmuSphere* was——

The smell of ample sweat.

And, the sense of the weight of her body that had sunk in the *bed*, and her *pyjamas* drenched in sweat.

"Unaaa……"

While giving an expression that did not make sense, she abruptly got up, taking off her *AmuSphere* at the same time,

"……"

And she saw a room with nobody else in it.

Tokyo's evening sky was probably as red as it was in GGO. It was dimly shining from the opening of the *curtain*.

Karen stood up sluggishly, took several steps, and caught sight of the black P90 that was adorning the *living* room corner.

"……"

Taking it into her hands, she held it in front of her stomach. And then, she looked at the mirror.

The black P90 wasn't sufficient in size to *cover* her abdomen, thus *pale yellow*[57] jut out both from the sides and from above.

"……"

Karen lifted the P90 and,

[57] Refers to the colour of Karen's pyjamas.

"……"

Silently fixed it to her shoulder,

"……"

She aimed at the huge woman with long, black hair in the mirror.

And then, she breathed in,

"Bam!"

And breathed out in a plosive sound.

Holding the P90 in her right hand, Karen turned back and went to the side of her *bed*. By squatting down, she lifted up her *smartphone* that was placed in a charging station, and immediately turned it on.

And then, picked out one of the numbers registered in it, and immediately dialled.

When she was connected,

"Good day, this is Kohiruimaki."

Without hesitation, she enquired.

"Can I make a reservation for tomorrow?"

* * *

『However, what went wrong?"』

『Uh huh. What went wrong?』

『Stop saying the same thing. Well, something did go wrong.』

『You guys, are you idiots! Have a sincere conversation. ——It's true that we l-lost. Let's admit it.』

『Uh huh. 'ven so, we got to shoot like crazy, huh.』

『Yeah, we did. Being able to shoot with a *machine gun* exhilaratingly like that was so awesome.』

『Are we going to participate in the next SJ if there's going to be one?』

『We will!』

『'course!』

『Obviously. But, I would want to survive and move up the rank a bit more next time. I want to shoot more.』

『Same.』

『No objection.』

『Alright! We'll be training for that occasion until then!』

『Training, huh…… Well, it can't be helped. Shall we do it?』

『Oh? What are we going to do?』

『It's pretty obvious. Every one of us will be raising our strength!』

『And then?』

『We raise it to the limit, and hold *machine gun*s in both hands! Like dual wielding pistols, but with *machine gun*s! That will instantly double our firepower! Double!』

* * *

2nd of February 2026. Monday. Past 9AM.

Ibaraki prefecture, Hyakuri Air Self-Defence Force Base. In one of the rooms there, two men had met face-to-face.

One of them was a man in his forties, wearing an Air Self-Defence Force uniform with a 'sansa' (corresponds to 'major')[58] rank insignia.

He was sitting in a chair with his elbow on the desk,

"Although that is only the gist of it, that is the end of the report that I can present today."

And listening to the words of the man standing in front of him.

"I will present the written report that will include everyone's impressions by the day after tomorrow."

He was a Air Self-Defence Force member in his twenties with a 'nii' (corresponds to 'first lieutenant') rank insignia and a sharp face.

The major nodded *un un* several times, and

"I get it. I'm look forward to the written report. ——Well then, let's hear your impressions for the time being. How was it?"

The first lieutenant energetically answered to the major's question.

"Yes, to put it bluntly, it was a „both good and bad *game*"."

"I see. Then, shall we start with the bad side?"

"Yes. There were quite a lot of moments when the enemies and their

[58] The JSDF has their own name for the military ranks and the author is giving military equivalents of the ranks in brackets. Further references to the JSDF rank will be translated

movement were unique to the *game* and can not be used as *feedback* for an actual battle. Especially the fact that it encourages the bad habit of disregarding aiming as it is easy to hit someone."

"I see. And as for the good points?"

"Yes. I lost four subordinates due to *mis*judgement, but right now, everyone—— is smiling."

After the first lieutenant left the room with his hat in his hand, the major picked up the phone atop the desk.

After naming himself to the person that he called,

"Hello. As planned, our young ones participated."

He began with these words, and roughly explained what he had heard from the first lieutenant just now.

And then, he added one more thing to the end.

"Was that of use as a reference? ——Kikuoka-san."

* * *

3rd of February. Tuesday. Before 1600.

In the premises of a certain metropolitan area women's university,

"Eeh!"

Karen was yelled at by one of the female high-school students walking towards her. It was a scream.

Those were girls whose names she did not know, but faces she recognised. It was a group of six short and sweet female high school

students who had constantly passed her by, who carried *sports bags*, and had a Caucasian among them.

Right after one of them shouted, the other five gave matching high-pitched shrieks one after the other, thus,

"Huh?"

Karen was slightly surprised and tilted her head.

'What are they surprised and shouting about?', before Karen could find out the answer——

One of the six, a female high school student who was probably the shortest, and was wearing her black hair in a braid, came to her in a half-run,

"H-hey! Excuse me, but——"

She looked up to Karen, and asked.

"Y-you're the onee-san whom we always pass by, right?"

Karen answered, while still not making sense of why she was approached.

"Eh, yeah, that's right……"

"Did you, cut your hair?"

"Ah——"

She now understood the reason.

Karen tilted her now light neck slightly. Her black hair, which was now in a *short cut* about the same length as LLENN's, swayed gently.

"Yeah. Yesterday, completely."

While the remaining five high school girls assembled, the first one shouted as if she was about to explode.

"It's lovely! It's cool!"

"I-it is……?"

The large Karen answered, overwhelmed by the small high school girls. And then,

"Every time we pass by, we would always say 'That person is tall, looks like a *model*, and is cool'! 'We're so jealous', 'She looks good no matter what she wears!' Since, we are so small…… Your long hair was lovely too, but your current hairstyle absolutely suits onee-san even more!"

"Ah——T-thanks……"

"I want to be taller as well! But, I've already stopped growing!"

"Is that so. You see, I—— I've always disliked being tall, but, somehow, I stopped fussing about it the day before yesterday."

"H-how did you make such a breakthrough?"

"E-erm…… probably because the day before yesterday I did something that caused me to feel like I would die time and time again? I thought, humans can become whatever they want if they don't give up."

"Th—— That's amazing!"

Hearing this conversation, one of the high school girls behind the braided girl tapped her on the back,

"That went well, right *Boss*? You managed to chat!"

" *Boss*……?"

At Karen's dubious question, the braided high school girl answered with signs of embarrassment.

"It's a weird nickname, right? It's because I'm the club head."

And then, she quickly lowered her head, and,

"I am Nitobe Saki! A second year at the attached high! I am the head of the rhythmic gymnastics club, and everyone here is a member of the club. Two of them are second years and three are first years. This girl is a Russian living in Japan, Milana Sidorova-chan."

Five matching greetings that were characteristic of sports club members came, and Karen lowered her head slightly.

"Good day. I'm a first year university student, Kohiruimaki Karen."

"So you are „Karen"-san I see. It is a lovely name."

"Thanks. Nice to meet you. Saki-chan."

"Thank you very much! Ehm, we must go to practice now, but could we have another chat if we happen to meet again?"

"Sure. We constantly pass by one another."

"Thank you very much. Well then, we'll be taking our leave!"

She once again received beautifully matching bows that were characteristic of sports club members, and even more so of a rhythmic gymnastics club members,

"Bye."

Karen lightly waved her hand.

The six of them cheerfully ran past her,

"It couldn't be, right?"

And Karen muttered.

And then, she turned forward again. The *key holder* appended to her bag, the *miniature* P90 dyed in *pink*, bounced slightly.

Karen took ten steps with her now short hair swaying——

And when she heard light footsteps drawing near her and——

"Say…… Karen-san."

Heard those words, she turned around.

Having turned around and looking down, she saw that Nitobe Saki alone was standing in front of her.

Saki looked straight at Karen,

"Could we have a handshake?"

"Eh? ——Sure."

Karen grasped the right hand that Saki held out.

At that moment, she applied some force to the small hand.

"Congratulations on your win. But, next time, I'm gonna win, chibi-suke."

Hearing Saki's voice as Saki cheerfully stared at her——

And finding out that her guess was right, Karen answered with a grin.

"Come at me whenever you want. Giga woman."

And so, after letting go of each other's hand, the two——

Bashin, hit each other's palm——

A beautiful sound resounded through the winter Tokyo's sky.

On the same day. Past 22 o'clock.

In a certain place in the metropolitan area.

In a pitch black room, the night view of Tokyo glimmered outside the window.

In the room, the voice of a young woman roared.

"Ah! Lame la~me lame! It's so lame that I couldn't participate in a *hard* killing event!"

And then, the voice of a young man that seemed to be trying to calm her.

“You don’t need to grieve so much, it’s not like GGO is going to disappear……”

“ *Darling*, you had so much fun fighting—— and, moreover, you survived—— and yet I couldn’t participate—— why why why why why?”

In between the woman’s voice, the sound of a person being hit was mixed in, and each time, a weak scream of a man overlapped with it.

“It can’t be helped, I guess……”

“Why?”

Another sound of a blow,

“Gehoh!”

The voice of a man violently choking overlapped.
“‘ven so, ochibi-chan was amazing, huh……”

The woman’s voice was filled with fascination.

“Ever since I saw her for the first time, I knew that from how naturally she moved, but I never expected her to move that well…… She’s really living it, she’s a „born with a talent for VR *games*“ kind of person. I’m so jealous.”

The man listened to the woman’s monologue without uttering a word.

“Moreover, we even ended up getting her fighting talent to bloom. That girl sure is strong. What kind of body does she have *IRL*, I wonder? What kind of girl is she, I wonder? It piques your interest, right. It’ piques your interest, doesn't it?”

"……"

The man, who did not answer, was hit several times again.

"Gehoh. Gah. Gofuh."

"Aa, lame! Lame lame! ——That's it, the next one! It's all fine if another one is held! A second *Squad Jam* tournament! Because, thanks to you guys, it was so exciting! It must have even raised the crazy writer's share! It wouldn't be strange for a second tournament to be held!"

"P-probably……"

A sound of a blow.

"Gehoh!"

"No matter what errands I have, I'm going to tear through and participate! *Darling*, you participate too! It's an order from your boss! Now then, during the event, we'll grandly grandly fight and fight and fight and fight and fight and fight and fight——"

"What are you…… planning to do?"

"Ain't it obvious—— I'm going to die!"

(to be continued……)

Afterword

Good day to all nine hundred million readers in the country! I am the author, Sigsawa Keiichi.

Eeh? There aren't that many people in Japan right now? Aren't my calculations off, you say?

I have to point out that I am a bunkei[59].

Now then, I truly thank you for purchasing——

『*Sword Art Online　Alternative　Gun Gale Online 1 —Squad Jam—*』

The book named thus.

It loses to my latest series,

『Danshi Koukousei de Urekko Light Novel Sakka wo Shiteiru keredo, Toshishita no Classmate de Seiyuu no Onnanoko ni Kubi wo Shimerareteiru. —Ｔｉｍｅ ｔｏ Ｐｌａｙ—[60]』

But it is still a book with a very long title. I have not decided on the official abbreviation at the present time, thus, please call it either

『*Sword Art Online　Alternative　Gun Gale Online 1 —Squad* Ｊ—』, or

『SAOGGO1SJ』, or,

『Sao AGo ISo J
笨 顎 磯 次』, or,

『Ｉｋａ
Squid Jam』, or,

『Sigsawa's latest work that makes full use of his hobby』, as you

[59] In Japanese high schools, the students must choose one of the two courses: bunkei (文系, humanities, social sciences and fine arts) or rikei (理系, science, maths). The chosen course determines the number of lessons the student will have on a given subject.

[60] The English title of the series is "I'm A High School Boy and a Successful Light Novel Author, But I'm Being Strangled By A Female Classmate Who's A Voice Actress And Is Younger Than Me." And it's apparently so long that I can't fit it into a ruby tag... Figures...

please.

And now, let's begin the „afterword" of this book.

As you all know, there are no spoilers for the volume here, as per the Sigsawa family precepts. Thus, please be at ease and continue reading.

By the way, I am the first and last generation of the Sigsawa family.

Now then, this work, as the *title* implies, is a *spinoff* (note: a derivative work) of 『*Sword Art Online*』(SAO)

SAO is a highly popular Dengeki Bunko *series* that is receiving high praise and is on sale now.

It is a story that takes place in the near future, with a world where *virtual games* that allows one to experience all five senses and the *games* themselves as the stage, and focuses on the activities of the protagonist Kirito, *heroine* Asuna, and many other fascinating *characters*.

The author is Kawahara Reki-san. And the *illustrator* is abec-san.

For more details,

http://www.swordart-online.net/

Please visit this official site!

It would feel wrong if I wrote it here myself. And, I feel like I'd be told that it would be 「inflating the afterword」.

Now then now then, for this work, I was allowed to use the world setting of the SAO *series*, as well as the the *game* setting, and constructed Sigsawa-*original* characters and story.

In other words, this is not a story where Kirito and other SAO *series*' characters will appear. This, is important. I wanted to say just this even if it became a spoiler, that is why I wrote this.

Now then now then now then, the stage for this work is a *virtual online game*, called『*Gun Gale Online*』(GGO), that appeared in the『*Phantom Bullet* story』in SAO paperback volumes 5~6. It is an SF *role playing game* where only guns, rather than swords and magic, are used.

When I, a *gun maniac*, finished reading the『*Phantom Bullet* story』in August 2010, I felt so, so frustrated and engulfed in agony.

"Kuhaa, that was so entertaining! And…… Why didn't I come up with such a setting! With such a setting, wouldn't I be able to write as many *gun action stories* where people don't die as I wanted! Moreover, I could use a real world Japanese person as the protagonist!"

After some time of loudly expressing my regret with all my energy, I suddenly had an idea.

"I want to write derivative novel that uses the SAO world, and GGO as its stage! I seriously want to write one! If I do, I want to publish it! Even if I had to do it as a doujinshi, though, if possible, I would prefer to get the proper consent and release it via Dengeki Bunko with Kuroboshi Kouhaku-san as the *illustrator*!"

It was nice as an idea, but I did not know whether it would be possible to realise. After all, there had been no precedent for it.

"Ain't it impossible, to put it bluntly?"

In that case, would there be anyone who would criticise me for giving up without trying? No, there wouldn't be anyone.

However, I thought 'Well, should I at least try bringing it up seeing as I came up with it?', and after awhile, I told my supervising editor about the *spinoff* publication *idea*——

And I was surprised. That I got the answer 'It's possible, if you get the proper permission from all related people, starting with Kawahara Reki-san and abec-san.

"Alright, let's write it some day!"

I firmly decided in my heart, but I did not actually do any writing, while time flowed by as I was busy writing other *series*——

What pushed the realisation of my aspiration, which I thought might disappear as my plan would have crumbled at this rate, was the second season of the SAO anime.

The second season of the anime had the GGO story. Having unexpectedly met its *producer* Osawa-san at a certain *event* venue, he asked me a question for collecting data on small arms for the second season. 'I want the anime *staff* to fire real guns, isn't there some good place for that?', to be precise (actually, Osawa-san was also the *producer* of the anime version of 『Kino's Journey』 that was broadcast in 2003. Could this be foreshadowing anime Kino?).

And thus, our talk went 'You told us about a recommended shooting range in Guam, and then accompanied us on data collection there, so how about treating it as a job and get an official remuneration?'

And thus, I ended up accepting being the small arm supervisor of the second season of the SAO anime. And speaking of what kind of job that was specifically——

In my case, I consulted them on the *ideas* of the small arms and *situations* in which they would be used, and gave my ideas, I brought *model guns* that seemed useful as materials for drawing and lent them to the *studio*,

and things like that.

When the script, storyboard and video were done, I'd also *check* them, and look for any big *mistakes* in small arms depiction, aside from those that were intentional.

And my, that was a very fun job. And it was the first experience in my life of my name being shown on the anime ED telop[61] credited other than as the original author.

While doing my job as the supervisor,

"This *timing*, greatly affected by SAO is my only chance to make the GGO *spinoff* that I've always harboured the aspiration for! Now's the time! I am seriously going to write it, so please allow me to make one!"

I haughtily shared my once-in-a-lifetime request with my supervising editor, Kawahara Reki-san, and Kawahara Reki's supervising editor——

And now you are reading this „afterword"!

That is the grand history *drama* behind the publication of this book. Well, looking back at it, a lot did happen.

I believe that this is perhaps the first attempt at a „Dengeki Bunko work that is based on another Dengeki Bunko work".

I'll borrow this place to thank Kawahara Reki-san, who gave consent for this work and became its supervisor, from the bottom of my heart.

Truly, thank you very much!

As for the work itself,

[61] This word originally referred a device that was used broadcast onscreen text (e.g. credits or subtitles) in the old days, but nowadays it refers to the onscreen text itself.

"Won't people not understand it if they don't know SAO?"

I was very frequently asked this on *Twitter* right after the announcement and figured I'd give a serious answer to it here as well.

To conclude, the book is written in a way that it could be enjoyed even by people who have not read the entirety of the existing SAO *series*, or even by people who have not watched the anime.

But hold on! I believe that people who have read up to volume six, the 『*Phantom Bullet* story』, of the original SAO novel, or have watched the entirety of the first season and up to episode fourteen of the second season, the『*Phantom Bullet* story』, of the anime will enjoy it even more! SAO is entertaining, I recommend it!

And so, the in-*virtual game gun action* novel that the *gun maniac* Sigsawa put his whole heart into is completed.

The *illustrator* Kuroboshi Kouhaku, who I have formed a long-time *tag*-team with, has once again drawn a cute protagonist! Thank you very much!

And most of all, I am glad if you enjoyed this, perhaps first in history, „Dengeki Bunko *spinoff* of a Dengeki Bunko work"!

10th of December 2015 Sigsawa Keiichi

こんにちは！ 黒星紅白です。
「時雨沢さん、
TVアニメ
ソードアートオンラインⅡの
銃器監修やってるのに、
黒星紅白ぜんぜん
銃器描けてないじゃん！」って
言われないように
頑張りました。
なるべく体とかで
隠れるように…。

Hello, this is Kuroboshi Kouhaku. I did my best so that I wouldn’t be told “Sigsawa was the small arms supervisor of the Sword Art Online II anime, but Kuroboshi Kouhaku can’t draw small arms at all!”. By hiding it as much as possible with the character's body...